

## **Developing Students' Language Competence and Essential 21st Century Skills for Future Employability: The Case of Latvia and Lithuania**

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### **Abstract:**

**Introduction:** Nowadays, language and intercultural competences have become core employability skills in many fields, supporting the development of other skills which emphasizes the necessity for specific pedagogic approaches in developing online learning materials and courses that would develop learners' language competence and other relevant 21st century skills for future employability. The current comparative summative evaluation research conducted in two higher education institutions in Latvia and Lithuania analyses students' feedback, elicited from 200 students, on the efficiency of the methods and methodologies applied in the course development and their suitability to develop the above-mentioned skills and competences.

**Methods:** The research implies a mixed-model design comprising a students' questionnaire (a quantitative tool) and students' essays (a qualitative tool). Quantitative data analysis was done applying descriptive and inferential statistics tests by IBM SPSS 22 software, qualitative data analysis – applying discourse analysis.

**Results:** The findings indicate that students highly evaluate the learning platform and the courses created. They find them as useful, visually appealing, interesting, interactive, well-structured, and easy to understand. Students acknowledge that they have developed their knowledge of professional lexis, reading skills, grammar and gained useful knowledge in their field. Significant differences were found concerning students' group, specialization and the course completed – local students vs. international students as to the evaluation of the learning platform, students of IT field vs. business fields, Latvian students vs. Lithuanian students as to the

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intercultural B2/C1 English course completed. The research results strengthen the cognitions derived from theory on significant issues to be observed when creating blended-learning courses.

**Discussion:** The course designed is an alternative way of learning and may be useful for anyone who wishes to update their language and intercultural competence either through a formal or non-formal education course or on a lifelong learning basis.

**Limitations:** The research period covered one semester only. Although the study materials for 16 languages have been created, the current paper analyses only the results obtained in piloting English and Spanish courses, with the predominance of learners opting for English courses.

**Conclusions:** The research results show that the methods and methodologies applied in the given interactive blended-learning courses have developed the students' language competence and have fostered the development of their digital competence, team-working and collaboration skills, problem-solving skills and learning-to-learn thus motivating them to become autonomous learners. The pedagogy-based approach applied in the current research has been successful despite a few flaws in the design of the course materials.

**Key words:** language competence, 21st century skills, blended-learning.

## **Introduction**

Contemporary world shows changes in employability patterns and skills required in the future. 'The employers' needs and requirements regarding the employees' skills change continuously' (Sós, 2018, p. 55). Several large-scale projects and researches (e.g., OECD, 2018; Cedefop, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2015; Scott, 2015; enGauge 21st century skills, 2003) have been conducted worldwide to define the skills and competences required in the future. All of them stress the importance of problem-solving, creativity, communication, collaboration, cultural awareness and the ability to communicate in several languages. Furthermore, in the future, while 'navigating through a complex and uncertain world' (OECD, 2018, p. 4), decision making and playing 'an active part in all dimensions of life' (OECD, 2018, p. 5) will become more and more significant. Therefore, collaboration skills, a sense of responsibility, design thinking and systems thinking are crucial. Moreover, they are inseparable from an adequate language competence level in order to update information, study innovations and best practices internationally.

According to the latest Eurostat data (2016), 35.3% of the working-age adults in the EU-28 acknowledged not speaking any foreign languages at all. 35.2% indicated they could communicate in one foreign language, 21.0% - in two foreign languages, and just 8.4% - in three or more foreign languages. Latvia and Lithuania are at the top of the list, as more than 95% of working-age adults speak at least one foreign language. However, this result has been attained

thanks to the fact that older generations learnt Russian and younger generations – English at school. The level of first foreign language skills is high. 73.2% of working-age adults in Latvia and 74.4% in Lithuania have proficient and high first foreign language level (Eurostat, 2018). Although this is a positive result, there are many factors, such as, history of countries, geographical location, political and socio-economic factors, etc., that require the active use of more than one foreign language on a regular basis. Due to growing mobility, international cooperation, knowledge exchange, the ability to communicate in other languages previously less traditional for the Baltic region, e.g., Spanish, Italian, or Czech is becoming an advantage.

Moreover, “A European Roadmap for Linguistic Diversity” (2015, pp. 4-5) sets forth four main directions that have to be strengthened: adopting a holistic multilingualism policy in the EU; enhancing the crucial role played by languages in social cohesion, personal, social and economic development, including mobility; the use of ICT to promote language learning and supporting the use of regional, minority, endangered EU languages.

In the given context, it is essential to develop new, interactive learning materials that would enable students to develop their language skills and simultaneously enhance their relevant professional skills and competences and increase learners’ field knowledge. This also coincides with the priorities for European cooperation set in education and training stressing the need for ‘more active use of innovative pedagogies and digital skills and tools’ (European Commission, 2015, p. 5) to develop VET (vocational education and training) learners’ employability skills for the changing labour market and contribute to a cohesive society.

It is true that ‘communication and collaboration involve working in coordination with others to convey information or tackle problems’ (World Economic Forum, 2015, p. 3). Consequently, languages are no longer considered only as a means of communication, but language skills are an important ‘economic, educational and cultural driver’, and ICT has become ‘a powerful mechanism to ensure effective learning and teaching of languages’ (A European Roadmap for Linguistic Diversity, 2015, p. 14). Therefore, the issue of developing learners’ language competence, at the same time enhancing their 21st century skills, is at the very centre of the current research.

In order to contribute to skills development and increase VET learners’ intercultural and language competences, 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 implemented. Nine countries (Croatia, the Czech Republic, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Romania, Turkey, and the UK) collaborated on the project addressing the following 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 and their contribution to a 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 (developing language teaching/learning courses integrating the culture of European countries), and foster creativity in language learning. The project targeted 16 languages: Croatian, Czech, English, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Romanian, Russian, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish, and Turkish (Languages4all.eu, 2016).

This paper presents the results of the summative (outcome) evaluation research done in Latvia and Lithuania to evaluate the two courses created - the intercultural blended-learning English language course (B2/C1 level) and the A2/B1 level interactive language learning course in 16 languages, and their application to develop students' language competence as well as enhance their relevant 21st century skills required at work in their field.

## **1 Theoretical background**

### *1.1 21st century skills*

The term '21st century skills' - one of the most ubiquitous terms nowadays (Silva, 2009, p. 630) - dates to the early 1980s when scholars, practitioners, politicians, entrepreneurs in many countries, e.g., in Canada, the USA, New Zealand, determined the need for researching the skills and competences required in the future. Due to the consequences of globalization and increasing mobility, life is changing and, consequently, in the future employees will need a different mind-set to survive and succeed (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009, pp. 5-6). Therefore, it is essential to analyse 21st century education requirements and understand the interpretation of the term.

'The term '21st century skills' refers to a broad set of knowledge, skills, work habits, and traits of character that are believed to be critically important to succeed in today's world, particularly in collegiate programs and contemporary careers and workplaces. Generally speaking, 21st century skills can be applied in all academic subject areas, and in all educational, career, and civic settings throughout a student's life' (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2016).

As argued by Marope (2014, p. 484), although the term '21st century education' is widely used as well, scholars still do not have a single common interpretation of it. Moreover, some of the so-called 21st century skills are not new, but they have gained momentum, e.g., critical thinking and problem solving (Chu, Reynolds, Tavares, Notari, & Lee, 2017, p. 18; Silva, 2009, p. 631).

As mentioned above, several skills frameworks have been elaborated or are being developed now, e.g. OECD Skills Framework 2030. According to Care and Anderson (2016, p. 5), 'Education of the 20th century was characterized mainly by content and knowledge accumulation rather than the skills and competence development. Whereas, it is evident that now 'an emphasis on what

students can do with knowledge, rather than what units of knowledge they have, is the essence of the 21st-century skills' (Silva, 2009, p. 630).

Regardless of the variety of skills classifications, all of them include learning-to-learn, innovation, communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, personal and social skills (Chu, et al., 2017, pp. 17-32; Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2015, pp. 4-11), decentralized decision making, information sharing, teamwork, and innovation (Binkley, Erstad, Herman, Raizen, Ripley, Miller-Ricci, & Rumble, 2012, p. 17) emphasizing knowledge, skills and values required for successful life in the 21st century.

Thus, to sum up, 21st century skills are 'those skills and competencies young people will be required to have in order to be effective workers and citizens in the knowledge society of the twenty-first century' (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009, p. 8).

### *1.2 Learning a language for special purposes*

Previous research on essential skills and competences required to succeed in the future in many fields, including tourism and hospitality, highlights the significance of creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, decision making, communication and cultural awareness, willingness to learn, commitment (Millar & Park, 2013, pp. 80-88; Donina & Luka, 2014, pp. 101-113; Wang & Tsai, 2014, pp. 127-133; Saunders & Zuzel, 2010, pp. 6-7). Furthermore, English language skills have been repeatedly mentioned among crucial 21st century skills to manage business, work with technical and specialized documents, etc. (Suto, 2013, pp. 1-5).

Research conducted on language learning (Laborda & Litzler, 2015, pp. 44-45; Schmitt, 2000, pp. 116-131; Yang & Wu, 2015, pp. 309-310) emphasizes the key role of vocabulary in second language learning. Laborda (2009, pp. 258-259) indicates that students have to learn how to communicate in a professional environment demonstrating adequate language fluency, and the ability to use the appropriate professional lexis. What is more, since students will work in various cultural contexts, a high level of intercultural competence is crucial. 'Familiarization with the achievements of other countries and peoples, the basics of communication in different languages' (Ryabchikova, 2018, p. 113) may be included as a component of the study material in the target course. The idea is strengthened by other scholars who also 'recognize the value of the voices of diverse learners considering language acquisition through a sociocultural lens' (Grigsby, Theard-Griggs, & Lilly, 2015, p. 61).

Research on adult second language learners (Schmitt, 2000, pp. 4-6) reveals that vocabulary is not spontaneously acquired but learnt through numerous exposures. Usually it is acquired through extensive reading, listening and oral communication (Krashen, 1989, pp. 440-444). Oral communication is significant both in studies and the professional environment. Hence, the focus of university

studies more and more frequently is on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) – a fast developing field, whose main objective is to ‘teach the language, both general academic language and subject specific language as well as language related practices’ (Tuomaitė & Zajankauskaitė, 2017, pp. 114-115), whereas VET institutions focus on English for Special or Specific Purposes (ESP), even Languages for Special or Specific Purposes (LSP).

LSP is characterised by the learning-oriented approach as the course is usually built considering stakeholders’ needs elicited through needs analysis done prior the course design. As argued by Simándi (2017, p. 97) this approach comprises practice-oriented activity-based learning situations.

Thus, the language syllabus of VET institutions includes relevant professional lexis and basic academic lexis necessary to succeed in studies and work. In both cases, special attention should be paid to the teaching/learning materials used and the tasks designed.

Learning materials have to incorporate features of learning a general language as well as consider the specific lexis in the context of the learners’ profession. As argued by Tomlinson (2003, pp. 20-23), language learning materials must have novel attractive and appealing content to achieve their impact, expose learners to a language in authentic use, and include adequate linguistic features. Authentic materials and language use in everyday work contexts is typical to learning ESP (Lu & Chang, 2016, pp. 375-376). The same may be attributed to learning other languages for professional use, i.e., LSP.

It also has to be added that ‘foreign language learning/teaching has undergone major changes since the advent of digital media as a tool for language studies. New technologies offer efficient ways for retrieving information, facilitating communication’ (Marcinkonienė & Zdanytė, 2015, p. 106). The spread of various online language learning platforms still raises a question of adequate methodologies to be used when designing tasks, the content of the material and teaching/learning methods applied, as well as selecting the Learning Management System (LMS). Application of online language learning materials in studies develops both the students’ language competence and digital competence which are significant 21st century skills as well.

### *1.3 Creating an interactive blended-learning language course*

Considering all the above said, a blended-learning course containing online and face-to-face stages was created.

In this research blended-learning is defined as learning facilitated by effectively combining different modes of delivery, models of teaching, and styles of learning (Heinze & Procter, 2004, p. 3) in the form of a combination of dominant online learning with interactive and problem-based face-to-face activities targeted at developing LSP competence.

The advantages of blended-learning over pure online learning are direct face-to-face and indirect online communication with learners, individualised feedback

(Olejarczuk, 2014, pp. 61-62), more flexible learning patterns, extension of materials and learning scenarios outside the classroom, individualised approach to each learner based on their language proficiency level, learning styles and learning experiences (Bueno-Alastuey & López Pérez, 2014, pp. 510-511), its integrative character and correspondence to constructivism learning theory and student-centred learning (Kaya, 2015, pp. 4-6, pp. 11-12; Luka, 2016, pp. 139-141).

Interactivity is ensured by applying interactive tools, such as, online and face-to-face games, video tasks, interactive websites, vialogues (video+dialogue used to initiate a discussion), online crosswords, etc., whereas problem-based learning is ensured by applying case studies, web-quests, project work, etc.

Case studies have been interpreted by Stone & Ineson (2015, pp.xv-xvi) as a learning strategy through which learners are required to consider, debate and offer possible solutions to problem questions stemming from real-life or simulated business situations based on personal or “second-hand” experience, observations, research, etc. to develop their language and intercultural competences, creativity and problem-solving skills.

The case studies created in the target course are language case studies which differ in their focus from the case studies used in other disciplines. As emphasised by Fischer, Casey, Abrantes, Gigl, and Lešnik (2008, pp. 18-19) in language case studies ‘content is a tool and the language becomes the objective of the activity [...]; therefore, content is normally less detailed, and results are assessed mainly for their linguistic competence.’

However, it has to be added that doing language case studies learners develop relevant 21st century skills as they need to involve reasoning, analysing, synthesising abilities, cooperate and communicate in the process of solving the problem.

Web-quests are partly like case studies but more demanding as they require collecting factual information and they end with a creative output, e.g., a presentation, an itinerary, a conference agenda, etc. Application of those methodologies place a learner in a real or imaginary professional setting and situation and learners are exposed to a certain problem situation they have to solve in a foreign language thus not only developing their language skills but also enhancing their creativity, problem-solving, team-working, etc.

## **2 Methods**

### *2.1 Research focus*

The current study presents the results of the research conducted within the previously-mentioned Erasmus+ project in 2018, focussing on a comparative analysis of the summative evaluation research results obtained in Latvia and Lithuania. The results depict students’ opinion on the A2/B1 interactive

language learning course and intercultural B2/C1 English course and students' self-evaluation results. The course piloting and evaluation was done in all partner countries, but this research focuses on the results obtained in Latvia and Lithuania, since the teaching/learning context and the profile of the HEIs represented are similar.

In order to evaluate the efficiency of the courses created summative evaluation research was conducted (O'Leary, 2010, pp. 138-141) applying a students' survey and analysing students' essays.

The course piloting lasted for 3 months. Students had an introductory workshop to get familiar with 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.

## *2.2 Research context*

Two medium-sized higher education institutions (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 full-time Bachelor students are international students. The languages of instruction are the national language (Latvian; Lithuanian) and English. Both institutions have actively participated in various international projects to research novel ways and approaches of implementing the study content thus striving to improve their teaching/learning. The HEIs have also been project partners in several applied science projects jointly working on developing online tools for developing students' language competence, entrepreneurship, and other essential management skills.

## *2.3 Research aim, research problem and research question*

The research aim is by conducting summative evaluation research to evaluate the efficiency of the methods and methodologies applied in the courses designed and their application to develop students' language competence as well as enhance relevant 21st century skills required at work in their field.

The research problem is associated with developing learners' Languages for Special Purposes (LSP) competence - how to select appropriate tools and methodologies that could develop learners' language competence at the same time enhancing the development of their 21st century skills and how to motivate learners to apply the tools created for their autonomous learning.

The research question: Has the pedagogy-based approach selected to create the course been effective in developing learners' language competence and their 21st century skills and does it motivate students to become autonomous learners?



#### *2.4 Research tools*

The questionnaire comprised 38 Likert scale type opinion variables (Fawcett & Pockett, 2015). Additionally, the questionnaire also included several questions on respondents' profile (country, languages spoken, language levels, age group, field of studies and the number of years they have studied the target language). It covered the evaluation of the learning platform (10 variables), course content, methodologies and skills development (11 variables for each A2/B1 course and 17 variables for the B2/C1 English course). The questionnaire was applied-face-to-face during the post course piloting session.

The feedback essays were written to evaluate each of the courses done. Students were encouraged to record their experience while piloting the courses, their overall impression, positive and negative aspects, their commentary, etc.

#### *2.5 Research sample*

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 Latvian and Lithuanian 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 level of students' English language competence: 8 - C2 level, 51 - C1 level, 90 students had B2 level, 36 - B1 level, 9 - A2 level, and 5 - A1 level. 69 students (35%) have studied English for more than 10 years and 52 students (26%) for 5 - 10 years. The most popular second foreign language was Russian – 99 students (50%) spoke Russian and 47 students (24%) were native Russian speakers. Another popular language spoken was Spanish - 55 students (28%) spoke it with some level of fluency. 20 students (mostly international students) stated that they could communicate in Turkish.

#### *2.6 Research methods*

The research implies a mixed-model design (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009, p. 152) involving a quantitative tool - a students' questionnaire and a qualitative tool - students' essays. Quantitative data analysis was done applying descriptive and inferential statistics tests 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, pp. 146-158), qualitative data analysis - applying discourse analysis (Fawcett & Pockett, 2015, pp. 64-67).

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 ( $\alpha=0.918$ ).

### **3 Results and discussion**

#### *3.1 Evaluation of the learning platform*

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

No significant differences have been found between the answers of the students of both HEIs (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.053-0.763), except 'found the platform useful' (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.001), wherein the students of Latvia gave a higher evaluation (Mean Rank=112.61) than the Lithuanian students (Mean Rank=89.10) and 'found the platform interactive, creative', wherein the Latvian students gave a higher evaluation (Mean Rank=108.09) than the Lithuanian ones (Mean Rank=86.10). These results might be explained by the fact that due to the limited number of class lectures Latvian students have less experience in using various online sources for language learning than Lithuanian students and consequently they have fewer possibilities to compare various sources.

International students evaluated the platform more highly than the local Latvian and Lithuanian students and they would more likely suggest the platform to other learners (Mean Rank=111.46 vs.93.92, Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.024).

IT students found the platform less useful (Mean Rank=62.89; Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.000), less interactive and creative (Mean Rank=64.15; Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.000) than the students of other specializations, which may be explained by their higher proficiency in technologies. Tourism Management students found the platform more interesting (Mean Rank=108.90; Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.000) than the others, which may be explained by the specific tourism related content of the courses. Business Administration students found the platform better structured (Mean Rank=157.86; Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.001) than the other students and they would be more likely to suggest it to other learners (Mean Rank=123.43; Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.000). In the essays they also confirmed that the learning was 'structured and easy to understand.'

No significant differences have been discovered as to the evaluation of the platform according to the language course piloted (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.102-0.981), which indicates that the learning platform is suitable for creating any language course.

The students' essays validate the quantitative data. They appreciated 'creativity of tasks', 'liked the interface of this quiz', and found the platform easy to use, for example, 'I liked this project, it is easy to understand, and students can get useful knowledge from this project' and 'everything was clear, easy to understand and really useful.'

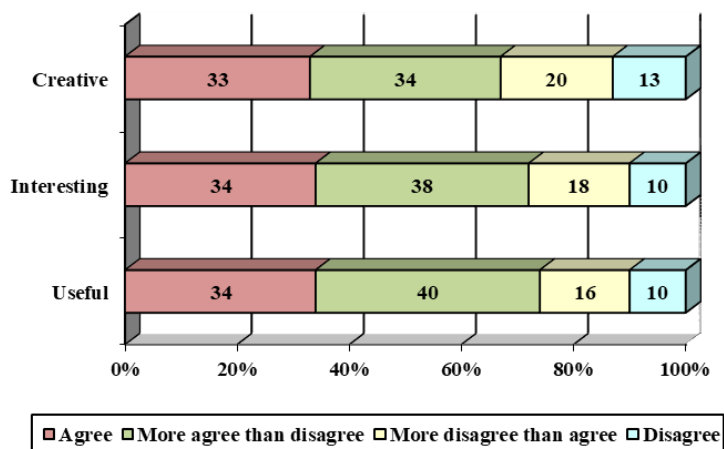
### *3.2 Evaluation of the B2/C1 English course*

Comparing the B2/C1 English course and the A2/B1 courses created, the intercultural B2/C1 English course got a slightly higher evaluation. The students found the B2/C1 English tasks useful (75.5% of students; M=3.5152, Mo=4.00), easy to understand (73%; M=3.8182, Mo=4.00) and interesting (69%; M=3.2727, Mo=4.00 and 3.00); the case studies - useful (70%; M=3.1697, Mo=3.00), interesting (69%; M=3.1818, Mo=4), creative (65%; M=3.0909, Mo=4.00); the face-to-face tasks - useful (57.5%; M=2.8061, Mo=3.00), interesting (56%; M=2.7879, Mo=3.00), creative (52%; M=2.6970, Mo=3.00). They admitted having learnt specific vocabulary (65%; M=3.1030, Mo=3.00 and 4.00), developed reading skills (60%; M=2.9636, Mo=3.00), and gained general and intercultural knowledge (69%; M=3.1758, Mo=3.00 and 4.00) which is a dual aim of any English for Special Purposes (ESP) course - to provide language learners with an opportunity to learn some new facts, information and increase their field knowledge at the same time developing learners' English language competence.

The qualitative data validate the quantitative ones. The most frequently used keywords are new, good, interesting, useful, entertaining, creative, clear, understandable, developed language skills, liked videos on cultures, positive, good learning experience. However, at the same time the students also highlighted certain problem areas.

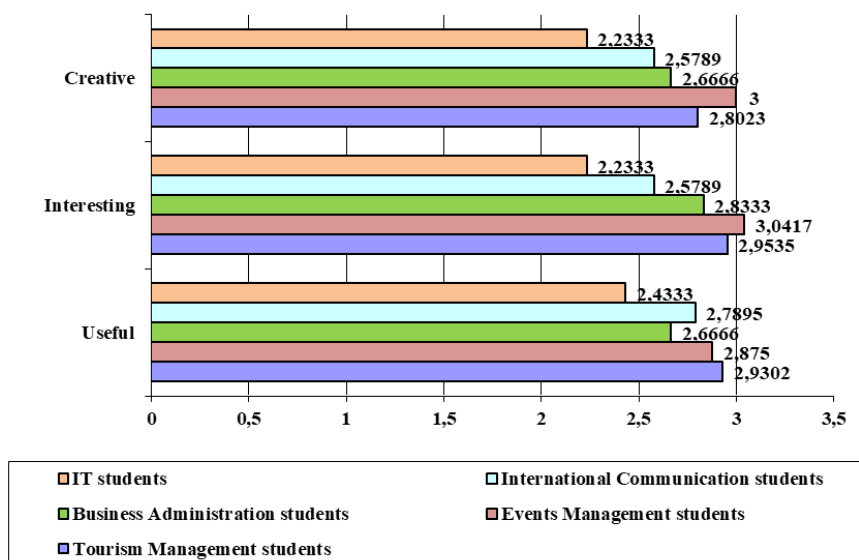
Concerning the improvements required, there is a difference according to the students' specialization. Tourism Management students found it a bit inconvenient to navigate through the platform and move from task to task, 'some answers are too long and difficult to understand', they expected to have more pictures with the tasks, some answer options seemed illogical to them. IT students pointed to technical problems more and the design, for example, 'I liked the idea but not the way it was carried out', 'listening audio has to be improved, mistakes in reading.' They also commented on face-to-face tasks, for example, 'communication tasks are good, valuable and interesting information, but tasks could be more interesting.'

This coincides with the evaluation of face-to-face tasks, in general. Comparing the evaluation results of face-to-face tasks (M=2.7636), case studies (3.1475) and on-line learning tasks (M=3.3197) (max=4.0000), face-to-face tasks received a lower score. In order to find problem areas in face-to-face tasks, an analysis has been done according to the 3 categories evaluated: usefulness of face-to-face tasks, how interesting they are, and their creativity (Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Evaluation of the B2/C1 English face-to-face tasks by the students, % (developed by the authors).

As it can be seen from Figure 1, all the categories received a similar evaluation. Therefore, a further analysis of the means has been done according to the students' specialization (Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Evaluation of the B2/C1 English face-to-face tasks by the students' specialization, means (max=4.0000) (developed by the authors).

As it is evident from Figure 2, the students studying IT gave a lower evaluation to face-to-face tasks, which may be explained by the nature of the tasks as most of the tasks have been created specifically for certain problems that employees may face when dealing with their customers. As IT specialists are not involved in directly serving clients, this may be a reason for the task evaluation as well, because they are bound to solve technical problems not the service ones.

Another type of tasks introduced is web-quests. A web-quest is defined as ‘a research activity that requires the learner to collect information about a subject using the web’ (Laborda, 2009, p. 59). It corresponds to a socio-constructivist learning approach supporting students’ collaboration and involvement of all students in the activity, at the same time it contributes to acquiring content-based knowledge and developing students’ language competence and interaction skills, as well as stimulates collaboration, taking responsibility for one’s own work and that of the group-mates as usually web-quests are done in small groups (2-3 students) and they have to present the final output of the group-work.

Significant differences have been discovered between both HEIs for all the variables evaluating the intercultural B2/C1 English course (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.000-0.023). Although the Lithuanian students evaluated the learning platform lower than the Latvian students, they have given a higher evaluation for the B2/C1 course in all the aspects. This means that the students’ general idea and expectations of learning outcomes differ.

No significant difference has been found in terms of the students’ group - local or international students (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.051-0.920). Thus, the results may be generalized that the B2/C1 English course is suitable for students of any nationality, but the requirements and the learning outcomes to be attained depend on the institution.

Similar to the platform evaluation, significant differences have been found analysing the data by the students’ specialization. Surprisingly, both Tourism Management students and IT students found the B2/C1 English tasks less useful than the students of other specializations (Mean Ranks 95.92 and 87.26 respectively, Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.036). They also found them less interesting (Mean Ranks 96.43 and 79.24, Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.005) and less interactive, creative (Mean Ranks 97.16 and 79.79, Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.012). Concerning IT students, the reason could be that the learning course is more targeted at students of service industries, whereas the reasons for such results for Tourism Management students is not clear. The answer could not also be inferred from the students’ essays, so this issue has to be further researched. Some other significant differences have been found in the students’ self-evaluation of their reading skills (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.009), grammar habits (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.022) and for the variable ‘found case studies interesting’ (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.045). The students of Business Administration have evaluated the development of their reading skills using the B2/C1 English course (Mean Rank=150.21) and grammar habits (Mean Rank=144.29) higher than other

students. IT students have found the case studies less interesting than other students (Mean Rank=85.26) which could be explained again by the specific lexis and problems to be solved in their field.

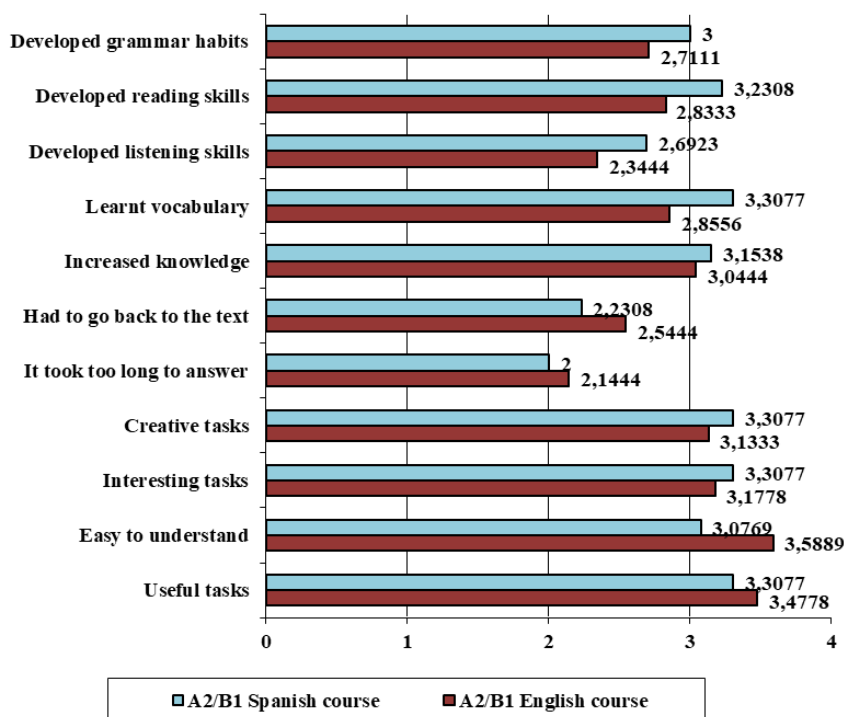
Comparing the research findings with the theory and findings obtained in other research dealing with 21st century skills (e.g. Szobiová, 2015), it becomes evident that more attention should be paid to creativity development, because 'demand for creativity and innovation in the work environment is growing' (Szobiová, 2015, p. 78), and the current research demonstrated average results therein.

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 the learning outcomes largely depend on the HEI.

### *3.3 Evaluation of the A2/B1 language courses*

103 students piloted the A2/B1 language courses. As mentioned above, the B2/C1 English course got a slightly higher evaluation than the A2/B1 language courses. The means for the A2/B1 course evaluation range from 2.3883 to 3.5243 (max=4.0000), the lowest being connected with the evaluation of skills development. For example, listening skills were evaluated with 2.3883, reading skills with 2.8835, grammar habits with 2.7476 and the vocabulary learnt with 2.9126. Although the means are not very high, the students found the A2/B1 tasks useful (M=3.4563) and interesting (M=3.5243) - 'It was interesting and useful to listen to the tasks and answer the questions', 'I really liked the module. It is a different way of learning while testing your knowledge by giving certain answers', 'Tasks useful, creative and interesting.' At the same time the students indicated many issues to be addressed - most of them related to the task design, the design and functioning of the interactive maps, finding the information required, and specific features of the interface, etc. It has to be emphasized that the IT students made very useful suggestions regarding technical issues, thus, the piloting has been very useful in this respect. However, the findings differed from those received at the course piloting of the previous project "Key Skills for the EU Hotel Staff", the predecessor of the current project (Luka, 2018, pp. 452-455), wherein the course was piloted with tourism and hospitality business students only and the piloting did not result in receiving such detailed suggestions for the course improvement. This clearly shows that any large-scale product created has to be first piloted with different audiences, and only then released as a teaching/learning aid.

Comparing the difference between the two A2/B1 language courses piloted - English and Spanish, the students piloting the English course evaluated the course more highly, with the exception of variables measuring how interesting the tasks are and their interactivity and creativity. Whereas, concerning skills development, an opposite trend has been observed (Figure 3).



*Figure 3.* Evaluation of the A2/B1 English and Spanish course, means (max=4.0000) (developed by the authors).

As it can be seen from Figure 3, no significant differences are evident and overall the A2/B1 course received a high evaluation. It has to be emphasized that according to the findings, the level of the difficulty was appropriate as well. However, the in-depth analysis of the A2/B1 course piloting revealed significant differences:

- Latvian students provided a higher course evaluation than the Lithuanian ones (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.000);
- International students provided a higher course evaluation than the local Latvian and Lithuanian students (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.000-0.007);
- Business Administration students found the tasks more useful (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.000) and easier to understand than the students of other specializations (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.000);
- International Communication students found the tasks less interesting (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.000), less interactive and creative (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.000), it took them less time to do the tasks (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.000) and consequently they less often than other students had to go back to the text to find the answer (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.000), but at

the same time the information obtained increased their general knowledge less (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.000) and they developed their language competence less than the other students (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.000).

The qualitative data obtained from the students' essays validate the quantitative ones as the most frequently observed keywords are liked, interesting, useful, developed, helped, good, understand, creativity, fine.

To sum up, the A2/B1 courses may be applied for developing language skills of students of any specialization as at this language level any topic includes information and phrases useful for everyday communication and the texts and the listening tasks are less content-specific than in the B2/C1 level course.

### *3.4 The impact of the English language competence on the evaluation results*

Finally, since the language of instruction and explanation is English, an assessment was done on whether the length of time studying English and the English language level impacted the evaluation of the learning platform and the courses as well as the learning outcomes attained.

No significant differences have been found in terms of the length of studying English. The only two variables with a significant difference were: 'found the platform interesting' (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.047) and 'will suggest the platform to other learners' (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.033). The students studying English for 5-10 years have provided a higher evaluation (Mean Rank=81.50 vs. 65.50, 71.60, 71.20, 63.42 by other students) which may be explained by the fact that they are quite experienced learners and have probably tried various teaching/learning means, thus they can compare and evaluate them. The students who have studied English just for a year are more likely to suggest the platform to other learners (Mean Rank=106.00) compared to the others, which again might be explained by the fact that they may be impressed by the variety of the learning material the platform offers. This is further validated by the students' essays wherein they write that they 'like the platform, more interesting than reading', 'a nice platform', 'I liked it very much.'

However, significant differences have been observed in most variables according to the students' English language level. No significant differences have been discovered concerning the evaluation of the learning platform (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.106-0.880), with the only exception of the time required to understand how the platform works (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.027). The lower the English language level, the more time was needed to find out the way the platform functions, which is natural as the explanations for the tasks are in English, although the technical guidelines are given in all the course languages (16 in total). Thus, these results may be generalised, and it may be concluded that such kind of a learning platform is suitable for any language learner, disregarding their English language competence level.



Significant differences have been found concerning the B2/C1 English course evaluation. The higher the students' English language competence level, the less useful they found the B2/C1 English course (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.015) which might mean that the language material included is too simple for the learners. Moreover, the higher the students' English language competence level, the less interesting (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.009), the less creative and interactive (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.001) they found the tasks, the less they increased their general knowledge (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.022), the less vocabulary they learnt (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.008), the less they developed their listening (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.047) and reading skills (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.010) and grammar habits (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.005). Significant differences have also been found concerning face-to-face tasks. And similarly to the above-written, the higher the students' English language competence level, the lower they evaluated the face-to-face tasks as well (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.000-0.006). This indicates that the course is possibly too easy for C1 and for C2 users. Although the texts are long and contain specific lexis and language constructions, the course is more suitable for language learners up to B2 English level.

As to the A2/B1 language courses, significant differences have been found for all the variables (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.006-0.042), except listening skills (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.120) and grammar habits (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.073). The students of A2 competence level gave a higher evaluation than the other students, which indicates that the lower course is suitable for A2 language learners and that the explanations are formulated clearly, too.

### *3.5 Students' self-evaluation in the field of their 21<sup>st</sup> century skills*

Digital competence has been significant in the last decades and it is going to become even more important in the future. 'There is little doubt that a new digital era has dawned. Digital technologies are not only changing the way we learn and work but are also modifying social habits and the way we live our lives' (Cedefop, 2018, p. 20). The importance of digital competence will continue increasing in the future.

The research results indicate that the respondents acknowledged that while doing the tasks they were able to develop their digital competence. The students of Latvia admitted the same in their feedback: 'applying computer for learning', 'a different form of learning than paper', 'learn how to navigate and solve the quiz'. The students are likely to use the course in the future as well: 'This project is very creative and interesting. I think student can get enough knowledge via this project. It helps to improve IT skills also, not only English. Thank you!'

Contrary to the Latvian students, the Lithuanian IT students were able to identify certain drawbacks regarding the interface and technical issues, for example, 'too small boxes for answers', 'answer windows stretched', 'a few bugs with questions and answers', 'hit boxes for the items on the map are too small', 'two spaces to fill but one answer, combo boxes not very convenient, layout could be

better, one click after answering', 'didn't like the design, "next" button seems to return an error.' Thus, the students could demonstrate their knowledge gained during IT courses and find flaws in the learning platform under evaluation, which are important suggestions for improvement.

Other significant 21st century skills mentioned in various researches are complex problem-solving, team-working, communication skills, learning-to-learn, creativity (Cedefop, 2018, pp. 28-30; OECD, 2018, pp. 4-5; Mulder, 2016). The methodologies applied in the current project stimulate collaboration, team-working, and learning-to-learn which lies at the base of students' autonomous learning.

Although, as analysed above, the students gave an average evaluation to creativity of the project in the questionnaire, in their essays the Lithuanian students admitted that the course is 'useful, interesting and creative', 'interesting, amazing; one of the best platforms.'

The learners also admitted that they had acquired useful knowledge in their field: 140 students found case studies useful (67 students agreed and 73 students more agreed than disagreed with the statement), 115 students found face-to-face tasks useful (53 students agreed and 62 students more agreed than disagreed with the statement). They also admitted that they had learnt useful field related knowledge: 76% of students having done the A2/B1 course and 85% of students having done the B2/C1 English course agreed and more agreed than disagreed with the statement. The following quotations from the essays by the Lithuanian students validate the quantitative data:

- 'A good course, face-to-face tasks were new and refreshing.'
- 'Communication tasks are good, valuable and interesting information, but tasks could be more interesting.'
- 'Useful, there is an opportunity to know correct answers.'
- 'Many courses to choose from, courses divided according to language skill, I will use it.'

To sum up, the research results show that the methods and methodologies applied in the given interactive blended-learning courses have developed the students' language competence and have fostered the development of their digital competence, team-working and collaboration skills, problem-solving skills and learning-to-learn thus motivating them to become autonomous learners.

## **Conclusions**

Students highly evaluated the learning platform and the courses created. They found the learning platform useful, visually appealing, interesting, interactive and creative, well-structured and it was easy for them to understand how to do the tasks and to understand their results.

Students acknowledged that the courses under investigation had enabled them to develop their knowledge of professional lexis, reading skills, grammar habits

and gain certain useful field knowledge. The B2/C1 English course enabled them to develop their listening skills as well. However, significant differences were discovered between the answers of local Latvian and Lithuanian students and international students. What is more, the B2/C1 English course got a slightly higher evaluation than the A2/B1 language courses. No significant differences were observed concerning the length of time of studying English, but the students' English language competence level had impacted the results.

The conducted summative evaluation research indicated the main strengths of the courses: the course flexibility, the usefulness and interactivity of the Moodle learning platform that may easily be adapted for various learning purposes and courses as well as different target groups, the development of students' problem-solving skills and collaboration skills through doing language tasks, preparing students for their future professional life.

The conducted research enabled to elicit the main flaws that have to be eliminated before making the course public: technical issues with the tasks, necessity to pay more attention to creativity issues and improving face-to-face tasks.

The pedagogy-based approach applied in the current research involving the creation of language courses based on the results of a detailed needs analysis of language teaching/learning goals in the specific context, selecting the most suitable methods and then defining the technological requirements for the on-line learning platform to be created, has been successful in the given case. It favoured the development of students' language competence, the relevant 21st century skills and according to their self-evaluation motivated them to become autonomous learners. It also helped students to acquire some specific subject-related knowledge, which is the dual aim of any LSP course - develop language competence and enhance students' field knowledge.

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