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The Importance of Intercultural Communicative Competences for Tourism Labour Market: Students' Views and their Self-Assessment

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Abstract

The present paper is founded on two pillars. Firstly, it is one of the current trends in education worldwide, i.e. to connect theory and practice. Secondly, it is the need to be interculturally competent speakers of a foreign language in today's globalized world of massive migration flows and signs of increasing ethnocentrism. Based upon these two requirements, the ability to communicate in a FL effectively and interculturally appropriately in the tourism industry is a must, since being employed in whichever of its sectors means encountering other cultures on a daily basis. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to find out undergraduate tourism students' opinion on the importance of intercultural communicative competences for their future profession as well as their self-assessment in the given field. The findings of the research, which are to be compared to employers' needs, revealed that there is considerable difference between the respondents' views on the significance of the investigated issues and their self-esteem.

Key words: intercultural communicative competences, competency development, tertiary education, undergraduate tourism students, questionnaire survey

Introduction

As stated in the Strategic framework – Education & Training 2020 (European Commission, 2009), “in our increasingly globalised and knowledge-based economy, Europe is in need of a well-skilled workforce to compete in terms of productivity, quality, and innovation”. However, growing discrepancies can be detected between the demand of the labour market and the skills people acquire, what leads to unemployment. Therefore, “effective communication between the labour market and the education and training sector is vital” (ibid.).

The present paper is part of a research project whose aim is to find out to what extent the accredited 8.01.01 Tourism study programme develops students' competencies with regard to the needs of their future profession. In addition, a further objective of the investigation is to make recommendations to optimize

the content of the bachelor's degree study programme 8.01.01 Tourism in correspondence with employers' needs. The data are collected through a three-phase questionnaire survey amongst the students of the *8.01.01 Tourism* Bachelor's degree study programme, studying at Constantin the Philosopher University in Nitra in Slovakia, both before and after having completed their three-month compulsory traineeship. In addition, the results are also to be compared with the findings of the questionnaire survey carried out among the entrepreneurs of the tourism sector in Slovakia.

The *8.01.01 Tourism* study programme at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia is offered by the Department of Tourism, at the Faculty of Central European Studies. The main objective of this three-year bachelor's study programme is to provide preparation of competent experts in tourism, especially in the context of the multicultural and multinational regions of Central Europe. The study connects theoretical knowledge with practical training in the business sphere, mainly in the tourism sector, which enables students to use the acquired knowledge directly in practice. With regard to the mentioned focus on the multicultural and multinational character of the Central-European regions, special emphasis is put on language education, since in addition to world languages, such as English or German, undergraduates also have to learn one of the languages of the regions in question, i.e. Hungarian, Polish, or Czech.

Although the research project is focused on tourism students' overall competences, (from problem-solving and team-leading through managerial and interpersonal skills to revenue and yield management or controlling quality), the present study only deals with the aspects of intercultural communicative competences (ICC), as follows:

- a) the ability to use a world language effectively in written communication with regard to the sociocultural background of the communicative situation;
- b) the ability to use a world language effectively in written communication with regard to the sociocultural background of the communicative situation;
- c) intercultural competence.

In order to develop the skills in question, undergraduates of the *8.01.01 Tourism* study programme at Constantin the Philosopher University in Nitra have been offered four courses throughout their three-year studies. English/German language 1 in the first and English/German language 2 in the second semester is provided in form of ninety-minute blocks once a week, during the twelve weeks of the semester. The syllabi are concerned with basic tourism terminology and relevant issues in the field. Similarly, students are offered a ninety-minute course of Business English/German 1 in the third semester once a week. The number of

lessons is increased only in the fourth semester, since Business English/German 2 is provided once a week as a 180-minute block. Both courses of Business English/German deal with business and economy-related issues in a tourism-industry context.

As to the development of intercultural competences, undergraduates of the *8.01.01 Tourism* Bachelor's study programme are not offered any courses on intercultural communication. Hence, students can foster their intercultural skills only within the mentioned language lessons or other vocational subjects, what to a great extent depends on teachers' willingness as well as on their competencies in the given field. This fact raises the question whether the structure of the offered courses and the number of the lessons per week is appropriate and satisfactory with regard to the objective of the study programme, i.e. to provide well-prepared, competent experts for the tourism labour market.

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to investigate students' opinions on the relevance of the selected issues in terms of their future employment in the tourism industry, as well as their self-assessment in the field in question. The paper is divided into four main parts. The literature review, which is the theoretical platform of the inquiry, deals with the concept of intercultural communication and ICC, i.e. the key issues of the study. It is followed by the research methodology, together with the research objectives and questions; in addition, the last parts contain the findings of the investigation and the conclusions.

Literature review

Understanding intercultural communication and its significance in today's globalized world

Although the list of various definitions for both culture and communication is endless, there is an agreement on the conceptualization of intercultural communication (Hidasi, 2004). Gudykunst (2002, p. 183) defines it simply as "communication between people from different cultures". Similarly, according to Hidasi (ibid.) it is an interaction between people belonging to different cultural communities.

According to Byram (1991, p. 22) intercultural communication usually takes place either: "*between people of different languages and countries where one is a native speaker of the language used*"; or "*between people of different languages and countries where the language used is lingua franca*"; or "*between people of the same country, but different native languages, one of whom is a native speaker of the language used*".

In fact, „the phenomenon of intercultural communication is as old as human society” (Damen, 1987, p. 23). Indeed, the first human beings can be considered the first intercultural communicators when meeting other groups of their kind during their wandering from cave to cave. In addition, the Bible is full of events describing interaction between different nations and intercultural communication played a crucial role during the Age of Discovery (Hidasi, *ibid.*).

In today’s globalized world, the fact, that cultural differences can be detected in every area of human life, draws attention to the necessity of intercultural communication, and to the benefits that can be reaped from intercultural communication. Liu et al. (2011, also Hidasi, *ibid.*) mention four reasons why intercultural communication is important. First of all, intercultural communication is needed in order to come to terms with the increasing diversity of the population, i.e., the multiculturalism that a lot of countries face today. However, multiculturalism can also be understood as an attitude, referring to “a society’s tolerance towards diversity and the acceptance of equal societal participation” (Kramsch, 1998, p. 20-23). In addition, in order to foster the acceptance of cultural differences, societies have to address the challenge of promoting intercultural understanding, i.e., making people aware that cultural diversities enrich their lives. Furthermore, intercultural communication can be enhanced through international business cooperation, and vice versa: international business exchanges can be promoted by a good understanding of cultural differences. Last but not least, intercultural communication is vital for facilitating cross-cultural adaptation, especially in terms of migration, but also in case of societies encompassing culturally different communities. Anxiety and uncertainty threaten social cohesion; however, they can be reduced by developing intercultural knowledge and skills.

Famous intercultural scholars, including William B. Gudykunst, Edward T. Hall, Geert Hofstede, Florence R. Kluckhohn, Fred Strodbeck or Fons Trompenaars emphasize that is almost impossible to become interculturally competent without understanding in what dimensions cultures can differ from each other, since it influences the way various cultures communicate, both verbally and nonverbally (Hidasi, *ibid.*, Reynolds and Valentine, 2004, Róka and Hochel, 2009). The next part of the paper, therefore, introduces two of the most influential models in intercultural communication studies.

Hofstede (2015) identifies five dimensions in which cultures can be differentiated (see Figure 1). First of all, cultures can be distinguished according to the “individualism-collectivism” dichotomy. In individualistic societies the stress is put on individuals’ goals and personal achievement; whereas in collectivistic cultures individuals are expected to subordinate their personal

goals to the norms and values of the group. In addition, in the former people are independent from other individuals of the community, whilst in the latter people see themselves as interdependent with the other members. Furthermore, cultures can be compared along the continuum of masculinity versus femininity. In masculine cultures, emphasizing power, competition and material success, the roles played by women and men are strictly distinguished; in cultures considered as feminine, stressing the prosocial thinking and interpersonal connections, however, these roles are often exchanged. According to the power distribution in a particular culture, societies with a larger power distance can be described by inequalities between people of different status reflected mainly in the obedient and respectful attitude of the less powerful toward the more powerful ones. On the other hand, cultures with a smaller power distance stress the equality and interdependence between people of different status. The dimension of uncertainty avoidance refers to the degree to which particular societies can cope with uncertainty. Logically, cultures with high uncertainty avoidance strive for information and certainty, whereas in lower uncertainty avoidance societies, people seem to be more comfortable with risk-taking and ambiguity. Finally, cultures can be classified along the continuum of short-term versus long-term orientation; whilst the former is usually associated with savings, quality of products or perseverance, the latter refers to quick results and less saving. It must also be mentioned that in terms of time orientation, Hall (1983, in Gudykunst and Lee, 2002; Liu, 2011; Malota & Ariel, 2013; Reynolds & Valentine, *ibid.*; Róka & Hochel, *ibid.*) also differentiates cultures as polychronic and monochronic. Time in the former is viewed as more circular and relaxed and performing several activities simultaneously is commonplace. However, in the latter people consider time to be linear and prefer to do one thing at a time.

Kluchhohn and Strodbeck's value orientation model (1961, in Hidasi, *ibid.*, Liu, *ibid.*, Malota and Ariel, *ibid.*, Róka and Hochel, *ibid.*) identifies five universal problems that all human cultures have to cope with, and value orientations refer to the means used by different cultures to address these problems. Firstly, human nature orientation deals with the fundamental character of human nature, i.e., whether people are primarily seen as good, bad or a mixture of these two. Apparently, this issue is profoundly linked to the dominant religion in a particular society, for instance, in Buddhism the goodness of the person is emphasized, while in Judaeo-Christian tradition humans can be both evil and good. This perception can influence, for example, how group leaders treat their staff, (e.g. whether they think they are generally lazy or hard-working). Secondly, person versus nature orientation refers to the relationships of people to nature. For example, highly industrialized societies are founded on mastery over nature,

whereas in developing countries human beings are considered to be part of nature and thus expected to live in harmony with all its elements. In addition, similarly to Hall's view, cultures can differ significantly according to their perception of time, i.e., time orientation. For example, the life of people in Western countries, especially the USA, Germany and the Switzerland, is organized around time and on time; hence, punctuality is one of the most highly valued character traits. In other cultures, e.g., in certain countries of Africa, time does not play a key role in people's lives, and there are communities which do not have any verb tenses because of their lack of a sense of time. Furthermore, cultures can also be distinguished according to their activity orientation, which addresses the problem of doing or being. It means that in Western societies a high value is placed on human work, and in certain Asian cultures, due to the influence of Buddhist philosophy praying is regarded as more important than working. Finally, relational orientation, corresponding to Hofstede's idea of collectivism-individualism, refers to a person's relationship to other members of the society. Thus, in collectivistic cultures individuals subordinate themselves to the needs of their community (family); whereas, in individualistic societies personal achievement and success are superior to human relationships.

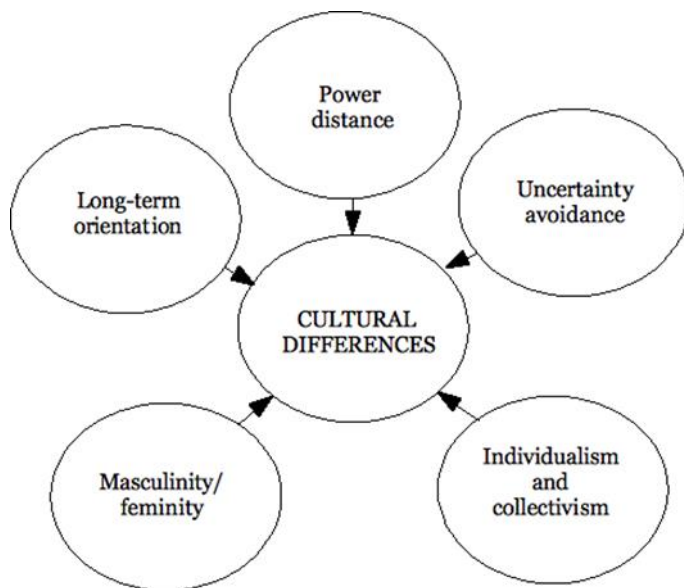


Figure 1: Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Dudovskiy, 2014)

Developing intercultural skills through FL education

As it has already been verbalised, according to numerous intercultural scholars “the key to appreciating cultural differences is acquiring intercultural knowledge and developing intercultural skills” (Kramsch, 1998, p. 26). Or as Liu et al. (2011) put it “intercultural knowledge and intercultural communication skills do not come naturally; they have to be acquired through conscious learning”. Undoubtedly, FL education can enhance acquiring these competences to a great extent by systematically integrating of intercultural aspects in teaching linguistic issues, since culture and language are mutually interrelated (Risager, 2006). *“The perspective of culture as a dynamic, vital and emergent process located in the discursive spaces between individuals links it inextricably to language. That is to say, language is at the same time a repository of culture and a tool by which culture is created”* (Hall, 2002, p. 19).

The current perception of language and culture as inextricable phenomena has its origins in the theory of Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir, the fathers of linguistic relativism. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests that the structural elements of specific languages used by members of particular cultural groups reflect the worldview of these groups (1940, in Hall, *ibid.*; Risager, *ibid.*; Róka & Hochel, *ibid.*). In correspondence with this theory, another linguistic anthropologist, Dell Hymes (1972, in Hall, *ibid.*; Malota & Ariel, *ibid.*; Róka & Hochel, *ibid.*), opposing Chomsky’s idea of language governed by a fixed and context-free set of principles, understood language as a context-dependant social activity. His approach became known by the concept of ethnography of speaking. Last but not least, the context-embedded perception of language as a social action also draws on the work of Michael Halliday, who considered “the essential role of the theory of language to explain the social foundations of the language system” (in Hall, *ibid.*, p. 25-26; Malota & Ariel, *ibid.*; Róka & Hochel, *ibid.*).

The reflection of culture in language and the impact of language on culture can also be illustrated by Hall’s high-context and low-context theory (1996, in Delgadová, 2010; Gudykunst & Lee, 2002; Hidasi, *ibid.*; Reynolds & Valentine, *ibid.*; Róka & Hochel, *ibid.*). The communication patterns and preferences in the former have a rather implicit character, relying on the context of the information and are hidden in the physical setting or in beliefs, values, and standards. In low-context cultures, however, the meaning is explicit and literal due to the elaborated system of codes for developing and interpreting messages.

The intertwined connection between culture and language is also reflected in Byram’s model of ICC (1997, p. 73), consisting of four dimensions: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and intercultural competence. According to the CEFR (2001) linguistic competence includes

lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic competence, while sociolinguistic competence involves “linguistic markers of social relations, politeness conventions, expressions of folk-wisdom, register differences and dialect and accent” (ibid., p. 118). Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use the language appropriately for particular purposes with regard to the sociocultural context and can further be divided into discourse, functional and design competence. Intercultural competence, according to Byram (1997, p. 73), comprises the following five factors: attitudes (*savoir être*), knowledge (*savoirs*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*) and skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*), as well as critical cultural awareness (*savoir s’engager*).

In terms of the development of ICC, Damen (1987, p. 5) emphasises that FL classrooms create a specialized setting for fostering the given skill; and, for some FL learners it is the only place where the target culture can be experienced. Similarly, Byram (1991, p. 113) outlines that “the inclusion in intercultural communicative competence of critical cultural awareness as an educational aim of FL teaching is crucial”; this standpoint being reiterated also by Alptekin and Alptekin (1990, p. 21) in that “a language and its culture are two inextricable related entities, and as such should be taught together”. Therefore, this requirement should also be taken into consideration by study programmes of tertiary education, especially those which prepare their undergraduates for constant encountering with other cultures. Undoubtedly, tourism is one such sectors of economy and, thus, special emphasis should be put on the development of intercultural communicative skills. This, however, must be reflected not only in the character of FL education, but also in the structure of the study programme, course syllabi and number of the lessons that foster the skills in question. Hence, in order to optimize the content of the 8.01.01 *Tourism* Bachelor’s degree study programme, the following part of the study brings partial results of the research on the competency development of tourism undergraduates in the given field.

Research methodology

Research objectives and questions

The main research aim was to learn about undergraduate tourism students’ opinion on the importance of ICC for their future profession as well as about their self-esteem in the given field.

Based on the main goal **further research objectives** were also determined, as follows:

1. To find out how important the ICC are according to undergraduate tourism students' views with regard to their future employment in tourism.

2. To learn about undergraduate tourism students' self-assessment in terms of their ICC.

Drawing on the research objectives, the following **research questions** were formulated:

1. What percentage of the respondents considers the following items to be very important and always necessary or highly important and often necessary: a.) the ability to use a world language (WL) effectively in spoken communication, b.) the ability to use a WL effectively in written communication, c.) intercultural competence?

2. What percentage of the respondents believes to be very well or completely prepared for the tourism labour market in terms of the following items: a.) the ability to use a WL effectively in spoken communication, b.) the ability to use a WL effectively in written communication, c.) intercultural competence?

The research method

With regard to the main aim, i.e. to reveal students' opinions on the investigated issues the quantitative method of questionnaire was applied.

The sample

The sample consisted of 104 undergraduates of the *8.01.01 Tourism* Bachelor's study programme, studying at the Department of Tourism, Faculty of Central European Studies, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia.

The research instrument

The questionnaire with 12 questions focused on the undergraduates' overall competences, (including their work experience and extracurricular activities). However, the present study only investigated two out of the twelve questions, as follows:

Question number 1: In your opinion to what extent are the following skills and competences important with regard to your future employment in the tourism sector? Please, indicate on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 – unimportant, completely unnecessary, 2 – important to a small extent, rather unnecessary, 3 – important to an average extent, rather necessary, 4 – highly important and often necessary, necessary, 5 – very important and always necessary).

Question number 2: Self-assessment – What do you think how well you are prepared to use the given competences in your future profession? Please, indicate on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 – I am not prepared at all; 2 – I am prepared only to a very small extent; 3 – I am only partially prepared; 4 – I am well prepared; 5 – I am completely prepared).

In addition, as already aforementioned, within both questions only three out of the thirty-two items, i.e. competences or skills were investigated, as follows:

Item number 5: Intercultural competence (openness towards other cultures, respecting different cultures, the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships, preserving one's own cultural identity, the capacity to fulfil the role of cultural intermediary between one's own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations);

Item number 7: Written communication in a WL (the ability to use a WL effectively in written communication with regard to the sociocultural background of the communicative situation, e.g. to meet the requirements of business correspondence when writing letters, compiling reports and documents, etc.);

Item number 9: Spoken communication in a WL (the ability to use a WL effectively in spoken communication with regard to the sociocultural background of the communicative situation, mainly in order to communicate politely, clearly and fluently with customers and business partners);

The items were developed based on the CEFR (2001) and Byram's model of ICC (1997); however, for the sake of simplicity and clearness, three components, i.e. linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences were included in Items No 7 and No 9, while intercultural competence was formulated separately as Item No 5.

Results and discussion

As it can be seen in Figure No 2, according to the students' views, the ability to use a WL effectively in spoken communication is the most important one of all the three competences, for it is considered by 57, 69 % of the respondents as very important and always necessary and by 31, 73 % as highly important and often necessary, reaching together 89, 42 % agreement on the importance of this skill. Furthermore, 7, 69 % of the students thought that it was important to an average extent and rather necessary; and, only according to 1,92 % and 0,92 % of the students it was important to a small extent, rather unnecessary or unimportant and completely unnecessary.

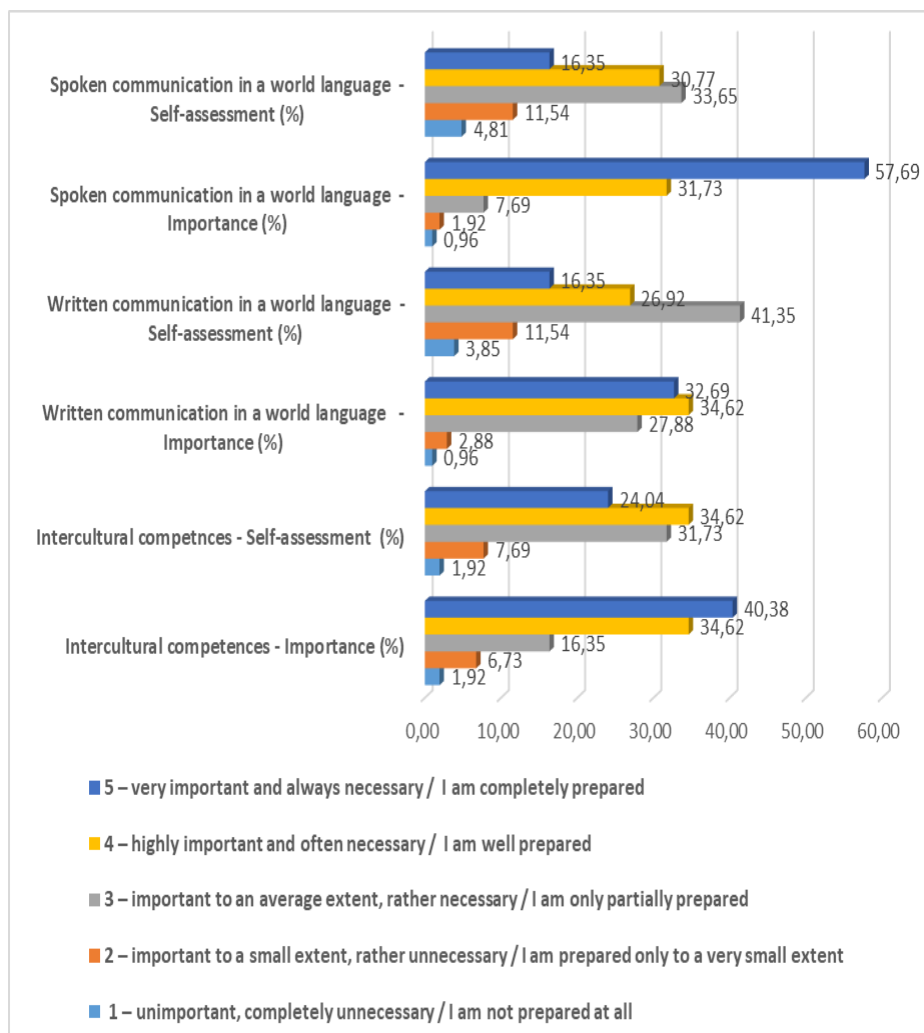


Figure 2: Undergraduate tourism students' opinion on the importance of ICC and their self-assessment

On the other hand, only 16,35 % of the respondents thought that they were completely prepared and 33,77 % considered to be well prepared to speak a WL effectively in their future jobs, what is 50,12 % together. Moreover, 33,65 % claimed that they were only partially prepared; in addition, 11,54 % said that

they were prepared only to a very small extent and 4, 81 % indicated that they were not prepared at all.

As far as the ability to use a WL effectively in written communication is concerned, it seems that it is considered the least important out of the three investigated items, since it was indicated by 32, 69 % of the respondents as very important and always necessary and by 34, 62 % as highly important and often necessary, that is 67, 31 % together. Furthermore, 27, 88 % of the students thought that it was important to an average extent and rather necessary; however, similarly to the ability to speak a WL effectively, only 2, 88 % and 0, 96 % considered this skill to be unimportant, completely unnecessary or important to a small extent, rather unnecessary.

In comparison with the undergraduates' self-assessment, 16,35 % thought that they were completely prepared and 26, 32 % considered to be well prepared to use a WL effectively in written communication in their future job positions, reaching together 42, 67 % agreement on the level of preparedness. In addition, 41, 35 % claimed that they were partially prepared. However, 11, 54 % indicated that they were prepared only to a very small extent and 3, 85 % chose the option of not being prepared at all.

In terms of intercultural competence, it was perceived by 40, 38 % of the respondents as very important and always necessary and by 34, 62 % as highly important and often necessary, which together makes a 75 % agreement on the necessity of this skill. In addition, even though 16, 35 % of the respondents thought that it was important to an average extent and rather necessary, according to 6, 73 % and 1, 92 % of the students, intercultural competences could be regarded as important to a small extent, rather unnecessary or even unimportant and completely unnecessary.

As to the students' self-assessment in the given field, 24, 4 % claimed that they were completely prepared and 34, 62 % indicated that they were well prepared to act interculturally appropriately in different situations in their future tourism positions, reaching together 59,02 % agreement on the level of preparedness. However, 31, 73 % of the respondents considered to be only partially prepared; in addition, 7, 69 % and 1,92 % indicated that they were prepared only to a very small extent or not prepared at all.

Conclusion

In order to draw conclusions, firstly, the findings of the investigation will be summarised though giving answers to the research questions.

1. What percentage of the respondents considers the following items to be very important and always necessary or highly important and often necessary: a.) the ability to use a WL effectively in spoken communication, b.) the ability to use a WL effectively in written communication, c.) intercultural competence?

The examined items were considered to be very important and always necessary or highly important and often necessary by:

- a.) the ability to use a WL effectively in spoken communication: 89,42 %
- b.) the ability to use a WL effectively in written communication: 67,31 %
- c.) intercultural competence: 75 % of the respondents.

2. What percentage of the respondents believes to be very well or completely prepared for the tourism labour market in terms of the following items: a.) the ability to use a WL effectively in spoken communication, b.) the ability to use a WL effectively in written communication, c.) intercultural competence?

47,12 % of the respondents believed that they were very well or completely prepared for the tourism labour market in terms of the ability to use a WL effectively in spoken communication, while with regard to the ability to use a WL effectively in written communication it was 43,27 %. In addition, in relation to intercultural competence 54,66 % of the respondents thought they were very well or completely prepared for their future profession.

In the light of the results, several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, it is the considerable difference between the importance of the investigated items and respondents' self-assessment, especially in terms of spoken communication (high importance: 89,42 % – low self-esteem: 47,12 %), but also in case of the other two investigated issues (written communication: importance – 67,31 %, self-assessment – 43,27 %; intercultural competence: importance – 75 %, self-assessment – 54,66 %). Here, the question arises as to whether the findings reflect undergraduates' lack of self-confidence or their lack of knowledge. It seems that the answer could only be given after further investigation in the field; and, a holistic view of the situation may be captured through the comparison of the present findings with the employers' responses as well as with the students' opinions after having completed their traineeship. In addition, to shed light on the reasons that lie behind the findings, it might be advisable to test undergraduates' knowledge and competences in the examined fields, i.e. their intercultural and communicative competences. Yet, apparently, the data show that there is a need to support the development of the examined competences

and to increase students' self-confidence in the field. Hence, in order to give them more opportunities to practice the WL both in written and spoken communication, it would be worth considering that the number of FL lessons per semester be increased. In addition, integrating new courses in the *8.01.01 Tourism* study programme, such as *Intercultural communication* would undoubtedly contribute to the development of undergraduates' intercultural skills.

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