Virtual Training of Cross-Cultural Competence
for the Global Market Needs

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Motto: "One must learn by doing the thing, for though you think you know it, you have no certainty until you try." (Aristotle)

Abstract: The challenge of the growing modern-day multicultural world depends on new educational approaches in terms of professional training. The article focuses on English for special purposes teaching techniques aiming to train students in economics for their future cross-cultural working environment. The virtual learning experiences developed by the e-Multicult project[1] stimulate formation of specific skills and knowledge that commit professionals' responsibility to their appropriate reaction and interaction in multicultural settings.

Key words: cross cultural competence, language blended learning, global market competence needs, reliable learning materials, authentic training experiences

Cultural diversity, effective communication and language learning

The diversity of multicultural settings redefines cross cultural interaction as a holistic process that includes both language skills and cultural competence. The association of appropriate and effective intercultural synergy to the applied language proficiency alone is inadequate, because such a process requires also knowledge of the ways language and culture interact and of how this interaction operates across cultures. The need to relate linguistic interaction[2] to the global cultural context redefines the process of foreign language learning as a key component of the communicative act that needs to develop intercultural competence based on knowledge and training of specific cross-cultural skills.

Cross cultural competence

The core components of the foreign language learning process addressing a multicultural context are the communicative and intercultural competence. These two competences are usually incorporated in the intercultural communicative proficiency which has been defined as a body of knowledge, skills, and attitudes enabling learners to become "*intercultural speakers*". An intercultural speaker, according to Byram, is "*someone who has a competence different from that of the native speaker, someone who is able to see and establish relationships between languages and cultures*" [1].

The intercultural speaker is defined by "*a multilingual competence, sensitivity to the identities present in interlingual and cross-frontier interaction, an ability to mediate/relate own and other cultures with 'intercultural communicative competence' (…)*" [2].

Therefore, this competence requires "*the cognitive, affective and operational adaptability of an individual's internal system in all intercultural communication systems*" [7].

By engaging in intercultural communication, an individual has to be aware of one's culture and language characteristics which otherwise might be not noticed. Promoting a spirit of tolerance for diversity, an intercultural speaker can review his own vision of the world, redefine his values that are seen as immutable, understand that truth is plural and relative and that different cultures have different values. The intercultural communication situation emphasis the communicator's intercultural affective competence that entails the wish to find out about him/herself, to reconstruct his/her identity, to develop self awareness and critical cultural awareness.

We make the distinction between *intuitive* intercultural competence acquired outside the educational institutions by interacting in complex cultural contexts, and a *conscious reflexive intercultural competence* developed in educational contexts. We acknowledge the conceptualization of *intuitive* intercultural competence provided by Bloom [3] , consisting in

motivation (affective, emotion), knowledge (cognitive) and skills (behavioural, actional) and add to its meaning the content that Spitzberg and Chagnon completed with context (situation, environment, culture, relationship, function) and outcomes (perceived appropriateness, perceived effectiveness, satisfaction, understanding, attraction, intimacy, assimilation, task achievement) [8]. As for the reflexive character of the intercultural competence we support its meaning of conscious training for coping with para verbal and non verbal aspects of communication. Prosody intonation, extra verbal utterances (touting, blowing raspberries, clearing one's throat, etc) along with bodily codes such as facial expressions, gestures, postures, proxemics and bodily contact, peripheral codes, such as dressing codes, all are taken into account for our view of intercultural training. We also associate to it linguistic knowledge and behavioural codes (protocols and rituals associated with specific situations and social categories and groups) that prescribe what is considered appropriate and when. [6]

The conscious development of critical awareness and intercultural skills will make learners understand cultural diversity and reassess their own culture and values. The self-reflection and the critical reflection on the origin and target culture define features of intercultural competence in the formal context for foreign language learning. The intercultural competence forces change, work with alternative points of view, and it allows interpretative alternation that develops the level of cognitive complexity, which means a broader and more subtle vision of others, less rigid and more adaptable interpretations.

The affective intercultural competence forges the ability to project and receive positive emotional responses in the intercultural dialogue, to develop a sense of community, tolerance and respect, based on four elements: the desire to find out about things, the desire to learn, the desire to break down cultural barriers, the wish to find out about ourselves. [5]

The cross cultural competence training through blended learning

Modern information technologies give learners access to knowledge available all around the world and make possible the dialogue through foreign languages on one hand with other people and, on the other hand, with the sources of learning. The web-based virtual learning environment allows learners to come into contact with a much broader range of materials than the printed and audiovisual course materials could include.

The multimedia teaching materials combining sound, text and images enhance the learners' language skills by developing their knowledge and consolidate their cultural mobility by extending information. In also provides increasing opportunities for independent learning, but also for group and collaborative learning.

Language learning in terms of pragmatic approach of intercultural communication means interaction, i.e. a socially reciprocal action based on the meaning negotiation which involves at least two people.

The e-Multicult project approach takes into consideration the specificity of cross cultural training which cannot be mastered through technology only. Students need also the opportunity to practice the skills they are acquiring and to receive an oral face to face feed-back in the classroom which is not possible in the virtual environment.

The experience of e-Multicult blended-learning allows participants acquire their cross cultural skills on virtual basis at their own pace and exchange ideas and practice in the classroom which ensures the consistency and durability of the learning process.

The computer assisted language learning is added the cross-competence training tool of effective class activity. The language competence descriptors are defined in accordance with the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

The cross cultural competence descriptors are settled through the teaching and learning tasks activity carried out in a virtual and classroom environment and make use of the language assessment criteria and standards.

Reading comprehension		Listening comprehension	Writing			Speaking		Cross-cultural competence	
Speed	Comprehension	Comprehension	Specific vocabulary	Spelling	Word order	Speaking fluency and coherence	Task achievement	Cross cultural knowledge	Self confidence
10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10

Relevance to learning achievement

The research solutions that e-Multicult suggested for the cultural skills training are closely connected to the current needs of the specific European labor market and to the international business risk, according to the following flow chart. The relationship between the specific labour market needs and learning goes through research and education feed-back which adapt continuously to the diversified labour market needs.
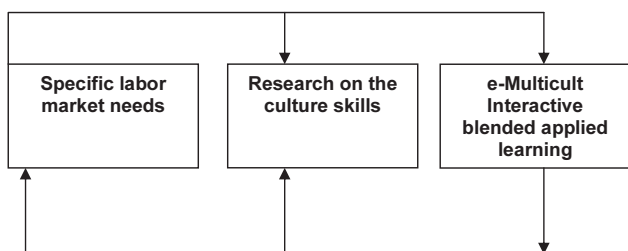

Figure 1. Meeting the needs of specific global labor market through research on cross cultural competence and its application of language blended learning

The e-Multicult developments on the cultural skills target:
- cross cultural communication
- awareness of students' own cultural features
- understanding behaviors and attitudes in the learning units considering their particular cultural extraction
- facing general culture patterns of particular English speaking countries

The contents of the reading and listening comprehension learning tasks aim for:
- raising the respect for cultural differences
- increasing adaptability in different working environment
- providing the student with the know-how to detect cross- cultural communication problems
- developing the actual cultural skills needed to resolve specific problems related to the cross-cultural communication

The major findings on the value addedess of cultural skills to the corporate that emerged from the project experiment fall into several categories:
- *communication*: accent, tone, body language, specific vocabulary and jargon
- *job philosophy*: time management, relationship between payment and productivity, management effectiveness of raw materials and energy, environment protection
- *attitude*: gender, religion, etc

The competence acquired the final stage of the cross cultural ability, leads to effective work across cultures when the learners in need are successful in turning their cultural knowledge into cultural synergy at their work place.

The role of authenticity in blended language learning process
Teaching materials have four functions, according to Dudley-Evans and St. John [4]:

- source of language (spoken and written materials),
- learning support (in progression structured knowledge body for learners),
- motivation / stimulation (challenging activities for learners in and outside
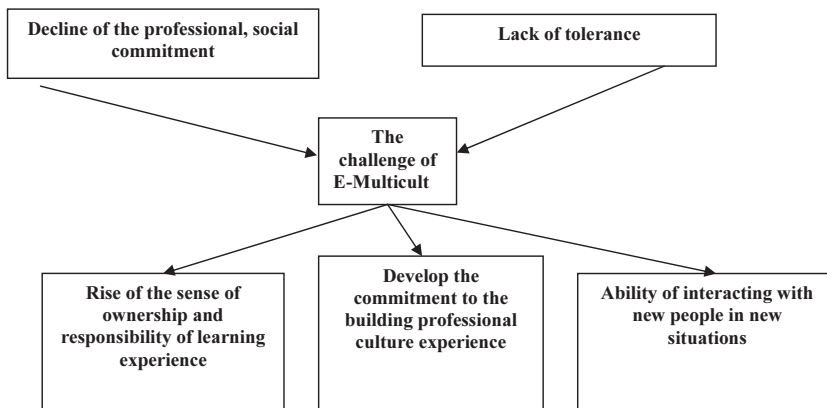- the educational context and reference (learning outcomes)

Figure 2. Committment of the e-Multicult project to the cross-cultural training outcomes

The effectiveness of their function fulfilment converts the decline of the professional, social commitment and lack of tolerance into responsibility of learning outcome, engagement in language and culture competence development and further growing capacity to interact and react appropriately in new context situations.

Conclusions
E-Multicult project aims to integrate the development of cross-culture competence with language learning through the holistic approach of blended instruction. The capacity of making training experience authentic and effective proves to be consistent with the present-day global labour market needs and is part of the work under development. The starting profitable results of the project made their beneficiaries go further into detailed research aiming fresh rewarding outcomes for students preparing in various professional domains.

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[*]Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)

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2. The article makes use of the definition that Noam Chomsky gives to the linguistic competence in 1965, cf.: Chomsky, Noam (1965) Aspect of the Theory of Syntax, Cambridge: MIT Press.

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Докладът е рецензиран.