



## Developing Language Competence for Tourism Students and Employees in a Blended Learning Language Course

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### Contribution

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Over the past 40 years tourism has grown substantially and has become one of the largest global economic sectors in the world attaining social and environmental significance (Scott, Gössling, 2015). Consequently it has resulted in increase of hospitality education programs worldwide (Robinson, et.al, 2014) which respond to the requirement for qualified hospitality industry staff. According to Beesly, Davidson (2013) literacy and numeracy are fundamental requirements, and, considering specifics of hospitality industry, a range of industry specific employability skills related with serving customers are significant. These skills should lie at the core of any curriculum in service industries.

As numerous studies show, languages are especially significant in hospitality industry (Millar, Park, 2013). Language is both a means for social communication and a tool to accumulate information and knowledge and pass it to others (Beacco, et.al, 2015a). Communication is not any longer regarded an aim but is a tool for participating in socially meaningful activities (Kaya, 2015) in everyday and professional setting.

Increasing tourism flows, mobility for study and professional reasons, global migration processes have placed Europe in previously unknown situation in which multilingualism is becoming not a desired state but vital necessity. This consequently leads to a change in language teaching models as well.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the designed language learning course (content, methodology, activities/tasks, online

learning platform, mobile application created) in three perspectives – provider, recipient and wider community perspective and introduce the changes required to create a course that would foster the development of tourism specialists' employability skills applying integrated language learning approach.

Such a course would enable hospitality industry employees to ease transitions to working life more effectively and have access to opportunities to develop their employability skills (*Learning while Working*, 2011), operate successfully in new multilingual everyday and professional contexts and engage in self-managed lifelong employability.

Designing of any learning course starts with a curriculum design that is created based on analysis of pedagogical, linguistic and field professional literature and conducted needs analysis comprising all stakeholders – learners, teachers and industry. In order to create an innovative language learning course that implies effective language learning theories and corresponds to the current and future industry needs, curricula perspectives, different course formats, language teaching/learning theories and essential industry competences were analysed.

The curriculum compiled takes into account the needs analysis results in five project countries in MACRO, MESO and MICRO level (Luka, 2015 in ECER).

Curriculum may be implemented in several formats. Analysing theories on traditional learning, e-learning and blended learning (Muñoz, et.al, 2013; Mejia, Phelan, 2014; Olejarczuk, 2014; Wong, et.al, 2013, etc.), and theory on global competences, including language competences, for employability (Candelier, et.al, 2012; Beacco, et.al., 2015b, c; Sisson, et.al, 2013; Frendo, 2005; Maican, 2014; Laborda, 2011, etc.) blended learning format has been selected as the most suitable for the current course. Its advantages over e-learning: better catering for individual needs, more student guidance; the advantages over traditional learning: greater flexibility, extension of materials and learning scenarios outside the classroom, does not have the problems encountered in classes with high numbers of students, different language proficiency levels and communication problems caused with using mother tongue in a language class (Bueno-Alastuey, López Pérez, 2014).

Integration of virtual learning platforms and applying other technology in language learning corresponds to constructivism learning theory which is the dominant theory in second language learning and creates optimum learning conditions and fosters student-centered learning (Kaya, 2015; Haggis, 1993; Kim, 2014, etc.)

Another aspect taken into consideration is the global character of contemporary education which is oriented towards creating alternative future (Standish, 2014), growing emphasis laid on employability skills.

## Method

This study is conducted within Erasmus+ project „Key Skills for European Union Hotel Staff” (Project No.2014-1-HR01-KA2014-007224; project period 2014-2016). Six countries (Latvia, Croatia, UK, Italy, Slovenia, Romania) are collaborating on the project addressing the specific objectives of Erasmus+ programme in the field of education and training: 1) to improve the level of key competences and skills (namely, employability skills and language competences), with particular regard to their relevance for the labour market (tourism and hospitality industry) and their contribution to a cohesive society (providing better cultural awareness and increased language competence); 2) improve language teaching/learning and promote EU's broad linguistic diversity. The project is targeted at developing professional language competence in six EU countries in 12 languages (EN, IT, HR, LV, SI, RO, HU, DE, FR, RU, ES, GR) and raise hospitality industry employees' intercultural awareness.

This paper introduces the second outcome – the created A2/B1 level language course in 12 languages and B2/C1 English language course to promote tourism students' and employees' language competence and raise their intercultural awareness.

Evaluation research containing formative evaluation from three perspectives – provider, recipient and wider community (O'Leary, 2010) in line with pragmatism paradigm (Collis, Hussey, 2009) to identify the initiative's consequences and opportunities for modification and improvement was conducted in summer-autumn 2015.

The study comprises four handpicked samples (O'Leary, 2010) created for the research purposes. Research stages: 1. analysis of pedagogical, linguistic and field professional literature on course creation, 2. course evaluation from provider perspective- analysis of self-evaluation reports by six project managers (insiders) (document review), 3. course evaluation from recipient perspective- a focus group interview involving 14 learners piloting the course (insiders), 4. course evaluation from wider community perspective- focus group interview of 7 hospitality industry managers (experts) and face-to-face survey of 21 language teachers (the highly experienced) from 6 partner countries evaluating the created language learning course on mobile application and online learning platform.

The methods – document analysis, focus group interviews, a survey were implemented to answer the research question posed according to evaluation research design theory (O'Leary, 2010): What are the strengths/weaknesses of the course and how could the process be made more efficient/effective for the organisation, end users and community?

Quantitative data analysis was done applying exploratory data analysis (EDA) and descriptive statistics, qualitative data – applying summarising, categorisation and structuring of meanings using narrative (Saunders, et.al, 2009).

## Expected Outcomes

Nowadays, blended learning has become an integral part of learning process. It is incorporated both in university studies, in vocational education and non-formal education.

The course is considered a blended learning course if computer (technology) assisted learning constitutes 30-79% of the whole course content implementation.

Languages, especially Languages for Special Purposes (LSP), have unique role in any curriculum, serving also as a means to acquire subject-specific competences. This can be formulated as the main goal of LSP courses in tertiary and vocational education curricula.

LSP materials should have rich input and include language structures and content information to make tasks as realistic for learners' language goals as possible.

Blended learning LSP course may develop the same employability competences as traditional course, but it is done in a more flexible and student-centered way.

Learners participating in focus group interview and evaluating the course from recipient perspective found the course and the application programmes useful and interesting. Most of them would be glad to use them at work (10 learners) and recommend them to others (13 learners). They found the course unique, but also indicated problems with certain operating systems versions where all the buttons/options were not visible. More creative features could be added to make the learning process interesting.

Language teachers' surveyed will use the online course at work incorporating tasks in language teaching classes (76%), suggesting students for self-learning (71%), improving their own language skills (48%). All teachers will use interactive maps and tasks associated in language classes (71%), for students' independent work (67%), increasing their own language competence (57%).

Hospitality industry managers highly evaluated the course, indicating that they are ready to use FrontDesk programme, mobile application and online learning tasks for improving their own and their employees' competence. They found A2/B1course more interactive than B2/C1course.

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