



Enhancement of Intercultural Awareness through Project-Based Training

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Abstract

When interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds, intercultural awareness matters a lot. Its importance is evident in education, training and international work environment. The authors of this article look at the concept of intercultural awareness as a component of intercultural competence including knowledge, attitude and cross-cultural skills. For enhancing intercultural awareness of learners, educational-cultural projects were initiated by S. Grasmane. The contents and themes proposed by her were based on the learners' needs identified in the survey [1]. Project-based training followed through voluntary annual projects from 2007-2019 implemented at Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LLU) in cooperation with several secondary schools and embassies. Experts from France, Canada, Belgium, Switzerland and Latvia contributed to the enhancement of the learners' intercultural awareness of Francophonie countries. To identify the gains of the project participants, a research study was carried out. Qualitative research methods were used: expert interviews and a focus group discussion. 6 experts gave their opinions. The focus group included 8 members of the academic staff of LLU. It was concluded that the main gains of the learners were the following: they obtained new, culture-specific knowledge; developed understanding of and respect for the francophone cultures; had possibilities to develop and demonstrate their cross-cultural skills, presentation, artistic, teamwork, foreign language, and self-management skills. The teaching staff had also several gains, for example, their knowledge on francophone cultures was deepened, and contacts with embassies were established. A major gain of the participating educational institutions was: networks among schools were formed and / or strengthened.

Keywords: *intercultural awareness, project-based training, cross-cultural skills, francophone cultures*

1. Introduction

When interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds, intercultural awareness matters a lot. Its importance is evident in education, training and international work environment. Employers value intercultural skills, including foreign language skills, but in particular intercultural awareness [4].

“Awareness can be considered as the foundation of communication. It involves two qualities: one is awareness of one’s own culture; the other is the awareness of another culture” [2]. The authors of the article agree that ‘through repeated exposure to or education about other cultures, we develop a deeper understanding of a culture’s unique traits, values and norms.’ [3]. S. Grasmane and D. Grasmane consider intercultural awareness to be a component of intercultural competence including knowledge, attitude and cross-cultural skills. Although a wide range of scholars have addressed this concept [6], [7], more knowledge, how to practically increase the intercultural awareness of learners, is needed. This practice-based research study argues that training through educational-and-cultural projects tailored to the needs of the learners can enhance their intercultural awareness of foreign countries.

2. Methodology

The approaches used by the authors of the article were: interdisciplinary approach, communicative approach, and project-based training. “Intercultural awareness” was chosen as the main construct for the training. The contents of the training were based on the findings of the survey, conducted by S. Grasmane and D. Grasmane [1], of 191 undergraduates from the University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LLU) with the aim to identify their needs with regard to French culture. The survey findings revealed that the majority of the respondents (or 61 %) were interested in France. The main areas of their interest were: the architecture, fashion, cinematography, music, gastronomy, history, and education of France [1, 75].

In order to enhance the learners’ intercultural awareness, a series of voluntary intercultural projects were initiated by S. Grasmane and implemented from 2007-2019. The themes were proposed by her on the basis of the learners’ needs identified and were reflected in the Francophonie Event programmes, posters and scenarios of the activities. During the project-based training, tailored to the needs of the learners, new knowledge on francophone countries was provided by diverse experts such as native speakers from France, Belgium, Switzerland and Canada, several professors of LLU, foreign language teachers of the



participating schools, and theoretical literature. The thematic events were held annually in March at Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LLU in Latvian). A partnership was created: (see Figure 1):

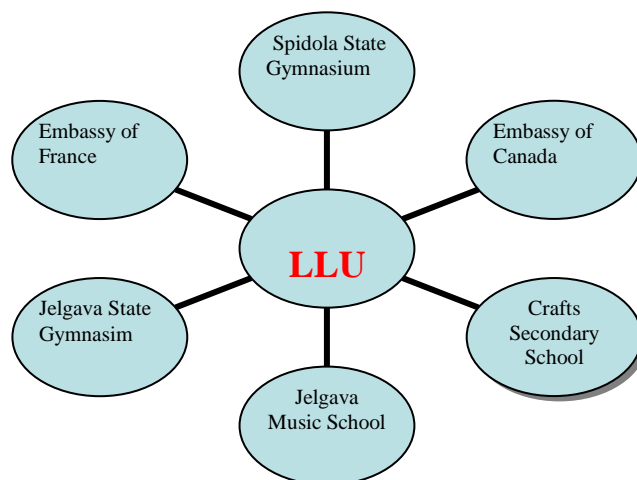


Figure1.Project Partnership

Other organisations were also involved in the project activities, for example, the NGO for Children and Youth “Svetelis”, Agency “Culture” of Jelgava Municipality, EU Information Centre “Europe Direct”, Youth Rock School, Jelgava Secondary School No. 6, Latvian Academy of Arts, the Embassies of Moldova, Belgium and Switzerland, and Latvia-Normandy Friendship Association. The participants from Latvia volunteered to demonstrate their knowledge on French speaking countries, their positive attitude towards these cultures, and skills developed due to the project activities. The representatives of the Embassy of France and the Embassy of Canada, in particular, contributed actively to the events by sharing real-life examples, providing information to the attendees and participants through presentations on diverse aspects of cultural expressions and values of their countries. The focus was on cultural features and cross-cultural interaction. The foreign language teachers from the participating schools made teams of pupils who were willing and able to participate in the events. The work of the LLU team and the school teams was coordinated by D. Grasmane. After each event, the quality of the outcomes was assessed, and gains were identified by the project team members.

Table1 presents the main areas covered, target groups and project participants, who contributed to the project cross-cultural activities of the Francophonie Events.

3. Thematic Francophonie Events Held at LLU from 2007 to 2019

Year	Areas Covered	Target Groups	Project Participants
2007	French gastronomy	LLU students	LLU and Embassy of France
2008	Geography, history and culture of francophone countries; Literature (Belgian comics); Classical music	LLU students and staff, secondary school pupils, teachers	LLU, Embassies of Belgium, Switzerland, Canada and France, Jelgava Music School
2009	Baroque Age in France: architecture and gardens; Poetry; Classical music	LLU students and staff, secondary school pupils, teachers, general public from City and District of Jelgava	LLU, Embassy of France, Jelgava Music School, volunteers from France – language teachers
2010	Education in francophone countries; Performing arts	LLU students and staff, secondary school pupils, teachers	LLU, Embassy of France, Youth Rock School, Spidola State Gymnasium, Jelgava Music School, Crafts Secondary School
2011	Gastronomy (French cuisine, wine tasting and the world of cheese); Performing arts	LLU students and staff, secondary school pupils, teachers, general public from City and District of Jelgava	LLU, Embassy of France, Youth Rock School, Spidola State Gymnasium, Jelgava Music School, Crafts Secondary School
2012	French chansons	LLU students and staff,	LLU, Embassy of France,



		secondary school pupils, teachers, general public from City and District of Jelgava	Youth Rock School, Spidola State Gymnasium, Jelgava Music School
2013	French fashion and society; Performing arts; Visual art (Impressionism)	LLU students and staff, secondary school pupils, general public from the City District of Jelgava	LLU, Embassy of France, Latvian Art Academy, Spidola State Gymnasium, Jelgava Music School, Secondary School No.6, Crafts Secondary School
2014	Cross-cultural interaction: "French people in Latvia and Latvians in France"; Performing arts	LLU students and staff, secondary school pupils, teachers	LLU, Embassy of France, Spidola State Gymnasium, Jelgava Music School, Secondary School No.6, Crafts Secondary School
2015	Education; Visual art (photography); Cinematography	LLU students and staff, secondary school pupils, teachers, visitors from Tokushima University Japan), general public from Jelgava	LLU, Embassies of Canada and France Petersburg University of Economics and Business, Spidola State Gymnasium, Jelgava State Gymnasium, Secondary School No.6, Crafts Secondary School
2016	Insights into Canadian cultural values; Cross-cultural interaction	LLU students, secondary school pupils and teachers	LLU, Embassy of Canada, Spidola State Gymnasium, Jelgava State Gymnasium
2017	French landscape architecture; Collaboration between Latvia, Canada, France	LLU students, secondary school pupils and teachers	LLU, Embassies of Canada and France
2018	I Latvian cuisine; II Achievements of Canada, Latvia and France in economy, political relations, culture	Students from France, LLU students, secondary school pupils and teachers	LLU, Embassy of Canada, College of Technologies and Tourism at Kuldīga,
2019	Cross-cultural interaction: Canada- Latvia-France	LLU students, secondary school pupils from Jelgava and Dobeļe, teachers	LLU, Embassies of Canada and France

4. Project Activities

The main activities fell under several groups:

Presentations given by native speakers from France and Canada (for example, H.E. Ambassador of Belgium on Belgian comics (2008), H.E. Ambassador of Switzerland on the history and development of the City of Quebec (2008), N. Mehault on French chansons (2012), the photographer S. Suodier on his "Ballade Lettonie" (2015), D. Mackay from the Embassy of Canada on relations between Canada and Latvia (2015), the French diplomat G. Bonneville on French landscape design (2017), and others);

Presentations given by experts from Latvia (for example, Prof. A. Ziemeļniece and Prof. S. Rubene on French Baroque architecture and landscapes (2009); Prof. I. Ciproviča on French cheese (2011), sommelier V. Grandāne on French wines (2011));

Presentations given by students (for example, D. Smilgaine "The Fascinating Canada" (2016), J. Žezlovs, M. Saveljevs and I. N. Rozenberga "What Is Latvia Proud of?" (2018);

Photo exhibitions: "The Fascinating France" by amateur photographers from Jelgava City and District (2008), "Travel to Francophonie" by amateur photographers from Jelgava City and District (2010), "France with Eyes of Latvian Youth" by students of Crafts Secondary School (2013), "Impressions of Ruelmalmason" by French professional photographers (2014), "From Tokushima to Jelgava" by a Canadian exchange student T. Cambell who studied in Japan and visited Jelgava (2015);

Creative culinary workshops with participation of native speakers (2007, 2011 and 2018);

Essay competitions for secondary school pupils and LLU students: "French Philosophical Thought" (2011), "Impressions on France" (2012), "Impressions on Francophone Countries" (2017);

Musical performances by Jelgava Music School, Youth Rock School, Jelgava Secondary Schools No. 6 and 5, and Spīdola State Gymnasium (2008-2016);

Short plays by pupils from Spīdola State Gymnasium and Jelgava State Gymnasium (2009-2016);

Quizzes for all attendees based on the content of the given presentations (2009-2019);

Exhibition of culinary books (2007);

Fashion shows by Crafts Secondary School prepared by B. Chaperon (France) and the future fashion designers from the Latvian Art Academy (2013);

Small talk with native speakers from France and Canada (2007-2019);

French- Latvian mini courses by N. Mehault (2014) and I. Liepa- Nagle (2015);



Reciting poems by G.Moreau (Latvia-Normandy Friendship Association) and A.Herbes (visiting lecturer from France) (2009);

Watching the movie: "Mummy" (by film director K. Delon).

5. Photos to Illustrate the Activities

The photographs given below illustrate some of the activities:



Figure 2. Fashion show by Crafts Secondary School
Photo: R. Freimanis



Figure 3. Workshop moderators (France)
Photo: S. Grasmane



Figure 4. Presentation by H.E. Ambassador of Belgium on Belgium comics
Photo: LLU Archive



Figure 5. Attendees and participants
Photo: LLU Archive

6. Research Methods

To identify the gains of the participants who had taken part in at least 2 projects, and to determine whether the students/ pupils' intercultural awareness was enhanced through the training, an empirical study was carried out by the authors of this article. Qualitative research methods were used: in December 2020, telephone interviews with by 6 experts from the participating educational institutions took place, and in April 2021, a focus group discussion was led by D. Grasmane. 8 project participants, staff members of the Department of Languages of LLU, took part in it. The discussion was recorded.

7. Expert Opinions

The experts gave their opinions regarding the gains of the participating students/ pupils, the teaching staff and/ or the organisation itself. The extracts from their interviews are given below.

Asst. Professor I. Ozola, Head of Language Department of LLU: "My students and I have been participating in these events since 2011, and I saw how the University became a place for meeting of diverse cultures, different age groups from school children to retired people, and different social groups. While preparing for the events, the participating students obtained several gains: they acquired knowledge on francophone countries, developed their understanding and respect for francophone culture as well as developed their cross-cultural skills, personal and social skills: team working, problem solving, self-management, interaction, creative and artistic skills. During the events, the participants had a possibility to demonstrate their cross-cultural awareness of French and Canadian cultures, their performing skills,



foreign language skills and artistic skills. The participating students demonstrated also such qualities as punctuality, ability to work under pressure, initiative and ability to assume responsibility.”

I. Ziaa, French teacher from Dobele Secondary School No.1: “A very important gain for the pupils and foreign language teachers was the opportunity to meet and interact with the native speakers from France and Canada. The pupils’ perceptions of the cultures of francophone countries were updated. Some of the participants, including myself, developed the sense of belonging to francophone culture. The pupils were able to demonstrate their skills and talents in an international setting. The Events inspired them to expand their horizons of francophone countries. My pupils were looking forward to the next event planned for 2020, and were actively preparing for it, and were very sad that, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the event was cancelled. However, their interest in the francophone culture has been enhanced, and they have been exploring the francophone culture independently online, too.”

Z. Feldmane, Vice-Principal of the Crafts Secondary School: “The main gains of the students of our school were as follow: while preparing for the events, they were trained to develop their cross-cultural skills, as well as foreign language, artistic, presentation and professional skills; they looked into the cultures of francophone countries and extended their knowledge under the guidance of teachers. During the events, the students could demonstrate their skills developed and ability to work, in the future, in the international labour market. Also, the School itself had very valuable gains: it could present its achievements gained through international traineeships and professional contests in France; it strengthened collaboration with the Embassies of France and Canada, and also with LLU as a prospective university for further training of our school leavers.”

M. Svika, English language teacher: “I found it very intriguing for the students to be exposed to other cultures and languages, especially the fascinating and rich French culture and history having deep roots in Europe. Some of my students were inspired to study the French language due to the Francophonie Events.”

Professor V.Bariss, Head of the International Unit of LLU, who had represented the administration of the University (LLU) in four Francophonie Events, pointed out: “The Francophonie Days were events which created a very special feeling because the approach used by the project author and the project team was non-standard.” A major gain for LLU: our university had a possibility to strengthen collaboration with secondary schools and several embassies.”

D. Svika, foreign language teacher: “My students and I really appreciated the opportunity to attend the Francophonie Events. It was a wonderful experience with regard to hearing the native speakers and feeling the subtle and sophisticated aspects of French culture.”

8. Extracts from Reflections Given During the Focus Group Discussion

Some extracts from the focus group discussion are given below.

Irina Orlova: “The main gains of the teaching staff from their participation/ attendance of the Francophonie events were: educators broadened their horizons on the francophone cultures and enjoyed the possibilities to interact with representatives of several embassies and educators from other schools.”

Baiba Pushinska: “My students were delighted to have an opportunity to communicate with the native speakers who attended the events and, thus, their cross-cultural horizons were broadened. Also, they felt that they were on equal terms with foreigners.”

Ina Gode: “The students acquired new experience. They got encouraged to discover new horizons and became aware that this world is small, and all of us are interconnected. After the events, the students posed me a lot of questions related to cross-cultural matters. The opportunity to communicate face to face with people from other cultures had provided some kind of training to them.”

Aija Pētersone: “My students from the IT study programme, who were attendees, gained new knowledge. They also admitted that they really enjoyed the contents of the events.

Joe Horgan: “It was a very good opportunity to advertise the University (LLU). I work as a foreign language teacher also at Spidola State Gymnasium and know that 6 of my pupils, who had participated in the Francophonie events, later chose LLU for higher education studies.”

Oksana Malisheva: “As my students were from the study programmes “Food Technologies” and “Public Catering”, they enjoyed in particular the creative culinary workshops with the participation of native speakers. During communication with them, while preparing and sharing meals, the students polished their cross-cultural skills.

Ausma Jegorova: “The attendees enjoyed the relaxed psychological atmosphere and appreciated the positive emotions they experienced during the events. Moreover, the bridge of understanding between French, Latvian and Canadian cultures was created”.

T.Shimkus: “The participating organisations had also several significant gains: a strong project partnership was formed, a network of organisations was created and expanded, the participating



educational institutions and social partners had opportunities to present themselves in an international setting and demonstrate their strengths.

9. Conclusions

- Project-based training through educational-and-cultural projects tailored to the needs of the learners can successfully enhance their intercultural awareness;
- The main gains of the learners were: they obtained new culture-specific knowledge; developed understanding of and respect for francophone cultures; had possibilities to develop and demonstrate their cross-cultural skills, teamwork, self-management, presentation, performing, artistic and foreign language skills through communication with the native speakers and active engagement in diverse project activities: presentations, seminars, creative culinary workshops, quizzes, musical performances, photo exhibitions, fashion shows etc.;
- The main gains of the participating academic staff: they broadened their horizons on francophone cultures and enjoyed the possibilities to interact with representatives from embassies;
- A strong network among schools and LLU was formed;
- Contacts with embassies were established;
- The participating organisations had opportunities to present themselves in an international setting and demonstrate their strengths.

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