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Working with the Intercultural Competence in Higher Education as a Path Towards Inclusion: A Practical Example from EUT+

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Abstract

The UNESCO defines the concept of interculturality as “the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect,” according to the article 4.8 of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.[3] A derivative of this concept would be “intercultural awareness,” which can be defined as the conscious understanding, free of clash, of the fact that people from different cultures have different values. In contrast to interculturality, which accepts and assimilates ways of living and thinking from different cultures, multiculturality simply refers to juxtaposed cultures that coexist in a single environment, though not exposed to partial assimilations among them.

Furthermore, both in the academic and the professional world, the term “intercultural competence” is widely used. If culture can be defined as “the sum of a way of life, including expected behavior, beliefs, values, language and living practices shared by members of a society” (Hofstede, 2001),

[3] https://en.unesco.org/creativity/interculturality

intercultural competence may be understood as “the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behavior and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions” (Deardoff, 2006). Its spread is directly related with other concepts of deep psychological load, such as empathy. Moreover, it has turned out to be fundamental when applied to global challenges such as massive migration or climate change.

The transversal implementation of the intercultural competence in Higher Education has already been proved, for instance, with students in the German-Polish border (Hiller, 2010), Spanish students interested in applying for an Erasmus program (Adalid Donat *et al.,* 2018), and Mexican students of Tourism, regarding their motivation for learning languages (Nigra, 2020), among many other current examples. Whatever the practical approach to the issue, all researchers agree that: a) the intercultural competence can and should be specifically taught in Higher Education; b) this can be successfully done in a transversal way (quite often, but not exclusively, in association with language teaching); c) and finally, the acquisition of this competence prepares students for the future demands of complex, uncertain professional domains.

This paper focuses on a recent experience carried out within the EUT+ frame, a pilot project based on interculturality and German as a foreign language that could be transferred to the rest of partners on a larger scale in the future. Entitled “DACADU: Interkulturelles Projekt,” the project has included students of German of three different universities (Darmstad, Dublin and Cartagena) with language levels ranging from A1 to C1. The initiative is inspired in a “logbook” recently published by the *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung,* an official organism that works for the effective integration of migrants in Germany. The logbook teaches young migrants not only through language, but also by means of allowing the two cultures of the participants (the one left behind, and the new one) blend and interact with the help of a variety of activities that encourage self-reflection, discussion, and language awareness itself.

Following this governmental model, we (the DACADU developers) have opened a blog to which the participants have made weekly written and audiovisual contributions, based on assignments explained in class, for the practice of the intercultural competence from different angles. To that end, we have replaced the focus on migration issues by another one closer to work, study, and academic environments relevant to the personal circumstances of our own students.

The innovation that this proposal introduces within the realm of interculturality in Higher Education is that the materials designed by the instructors from the three institutions for the practice of the intercultural competence were only and exclusively dealt with in our respective German language courses. In contrast, the contents that have gradually shaped the blog, and whose input has had

a reflection, week after week, in the new assignments, have been designed by the students themselves (with the instructors acting only as supervisors at this stage of the project).

The working method has also been innovative: in small groups that included at least one student from each institution, these were asked to meet up through social networks at least once every week, discuss the given assignment together, and help one another with their respective proposals. To make communication more effective, they were encouraged to use not only German, but also English during these meetings whenever necessary. Although they were free to organize this part of the activity on their own accord, the instructors were constantly monitoring it from the outside, asking for feedback, establishing certain deadlines for evidence and results, correcting errors detected throughout the process, and holding their own parallel meetings and discussions along the way.

Developed during the second term of the 2021-2022 academic year, this paper discusses the different phases of the project, with special attention to: a) the nature of the tasks/topics assigned and the materials produced; b) the sequencing of the project; c) the evaluation tools designed, aimed both at measuring the degree of satisfaction among students and related issues (motivation, learning enhancement, raise of awareness), and the improvement in the acquisition of language and intercultural content. All in all, the experience provides a practical example of how to deal with inclusive practices in Higher Education through language learning and interculturality.

Keywords: Intercultural competence, Higher Education, Logbook, Language learning, Inclusion.

Working with the Intercultural Competence in Higher Education as a Path Towards Inclusion: A Practical Example from EUT+

Introduction

The demands for internationalization within the EU Higher Education networks have allowed for the establishment, among other initiatives, of strategic alliances such as the EUt+ frame that hosts this *rise2022* encounter. The technological aspect of this alliance obviously holds a strong appeal, being the technical demands of our society in urgent need of specialists worldwide, and offering all our institutions specialized degrees and masters' degrees in technical and scientific domains. However, the socio-cultural side of the EUt+ initiative, as it is formulated within this Conference through the keywords of Equity, Inclusion and Sustainability, shows to what extent one part of the equation complements the other. Within the lines of the latter element of our common challenge, the present paper explains the process and results of an international, collaborative, Higher Education teaching/learning initiative within the EUt+ program for the practice of the intercultural competence among students of the German language.

If culture can be defined as "the sum of a way of life, including expected behavior, beliefs, values, language and living practices shared by members of a society" (Hofstede, 2001), intercultural competence may be understood as "the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behavior and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions" (Deardoff, 2006). Other key issues implicit in the concept are "global competence, multiculturalism, cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural sensitivity, cultural intelligence, international communication, transcultural communication, cross-cultural awareness and global citizenship" (Fantini, 2009: 196).

The implementation of the intercultural competence in Higher Education—from now on referred to as ICC—aims to encourage the formation of "interculturally competent graduates as global citizens". From this perspective, "ICC not only needs to be contextualized by the academic disciplines and the professional needs of a global labor market, but universities also have to

respond to the wider societal needs. This means teaching students how to live productive and responsible lives in which global interdependence is not simply framed by economic benefits but also includes an understanding of their role in developing and maintaining a sustainable equitable society and world for humankind" (Gregersen-Hermans, 2017, 11). Furthermore, the development of the ICC in academic environments requires, in practical terms, that "graduates need to be able to conceptualize and behave inside and outside a local context simultaneously. They need to be able to make moral judgements and ethical choices that are based on a deep level of cultural awareness and understanding, while engaging in culturally sensitive collaboration within the local environment" (Gregersen-Hermans, 2017, 11).

Hence, the development of the intercultural competence in Higher Education must be approached as a transversal task and, not exclusively, but most favorably, in close connection with language learning. From the main components of any language-learning process—linguistic, discursive-pragmatic, sociocultural, strategic, and personal—, the emphasis on the sociocultural associated to the linguistic one may easily permeate the rest of them, with special attention to the personal traits (Adalid Donat *et al*., 2018), thus triggering both social and individual progress in the participants. Furthermore, the effective application of ICC strategies before taking part in an Erasmus exchange, for example, avoids the so-much feared "cultural shock" (Alves & De la Peña, 2013) and leads to a correct process of acculturation among participants (Berry, 2005). In short, its assimilation both by undergraduates and graduates leads not only to the improvement of social awareness and tolerance in multilingual and multicultural societies, but it also contributes to the rise of the levels of employment and economic benefit in professional specific sectors. A case in point could be that of the tourism industry, one of the pillars of Southern-European states and of developing economies (Onghena, 2003; Fusté et al., 2015).

Our own contribution to the implementation of the ICC in our institutions, and on a partner-oriented basis, stems from two theoretical/methodological factors that have in fact become ever-present in Higher Education teaching environments during the last decades: blended learning, and digital/multimodal written communication. Both of them are included in the larger frame, from the instructors' perspective, of pilot framework fundamentals.

Theoretical/Methodological Factors

The first aspect of our proposal for the practice of the ICC is clearly related to the implementation of online teaching strategies. The COVID crisis has produced a worldwide acceleration of the ongoing processes that have fostered blended learning in all its forms since the end of the twentieth century: instructors and students from all the continents, supported by IT teams, have

developed IT advanced skills for all disciplines in no time. Within the broad concept of blended learning (Torrisi-Steele & Drew, 2013), we adhere to the definition provided by Bliuc, according to which "Blended learning describes learning activities that involve a systematic combination of co-present (face-to-face) interactions and technologically-mediated interactions between students, teachers and learning resources" (Bliuc et al., 2007: 234). In this specific case, the possibilities that online capabilities offer have allowed us to surpass the limits of the physical classroom, thus enhancing their possibilities not only with regard to the practice of the ICC, but in many other ways (Carbajosa & Rea).

On another note, the principles of blended learning also fall into the limits of one term claimed by the EUt+ program within its foundations, namely, *Collaborative Online International Learning* (COIL). The term joins key issues such as technology, internationalization, and virtual collaboration in Higher Education institutions (Taylor, 2017). If, at the beginning of the national lockdowns caused by the pandemic, lecturers all over the world switched to urgent forms of online teaching for purposes exclusively related to their courses—that is, the change was mainly conceived for the same uses of an intranet, as it were—, this two-year experience has paved the way for a step out of the boundaries established by each particular institution, and whose limits are still unexplored.

Without denying the importance of traditional tuition in academic environments—a lecturer who, in class, introduces a topic, designs activities, gives instructions, and manages participation—, for the purposes of the activity described in the present article, the use of asynchronous learning models (Hiltz & Goldman, 2005) that enable a real contact among students from different countries in online encounters unmediated by lecturers has proved to be crucial for the enhancement of intercultural awareness. At the same time, and under similar guiding lines to those offered by blended learning, the processes initiated have helped increase our learners' autonomy, creativity, and motivation. Such outcomes, already associated with this hybrid teaching-learning model (Rapanta *et al.*, 2020) will be later discussed in relation with the project explained in this article.

The second factor related to this proposal and, again, in full consonance with blended learning, is known as digital written communication. Digital writing can be described as "written communication that goes beyond just text, is created through the use of technology, and is connected with and made available by a wide network of web-based resources".[4] As in the case of blended learning—although for different reasons—, the blurring of borders that digital writing offers in teaching and learning processes does not only affect the physical limits of the classroom;

[4] Developing Digital Writing Skills, https://www.onlinecollege.org/developing-digital-writing-skills/

it also removes the foundations of writing as a genre in itself. Thus, the established frontiers are surpassed between oral and written, formal and informal, individual and collective, text and audiovisual communication.

Born as a professional activity for web and content designers (Lawrence, 2022), the extended use of digital writing skills in education and at all levels has proved unimaginably enriching, as well as multimodal-oriented (Bickford, 2020; Oskoz & Elola, 2014), as it will be proved in the account of our own experience. Moreover, the adoption of digital writing as the main working method for the project described renews the classical task-based teaching paradigm (Meri-Yilan, 2020), while it fosters self-regulating practices by its practitioners (Calle Álvarez, 2015).

As a corollary to the crucial aspect of digital communication, it is also important to remind that the EUt+ is at present developing a series of seminars under the common title of "SUCCESS: Digital Communication in 21st Century," whose first encounter took place on April 2022 at the Technical University of Cartagena (UPCT) with the participation of students from several partner universities. This initiative is bound to continue during the next two years, with follow-up seminars at different campuses within the EUt+ frame. Its outcomes will no doubt increase the awareness of digital communication in academic environments.

Finally, the current proposal follows the guidelines of the document "A guide to piloting WP2 initiatives in EUt+," according to which the uncertainty inherent to any starting teaching initiative may be partially modelled and assessed throughout the process for a more successful outcome.[5] Basic issues involved in any project frame, such as goals, time limit, pilot group, plan, feedback, and challenges have been therefore duly addressed. In fact, the results are ready to be implemented in a larger phase, engaging new agents, challenges, and concepts beyond the ever-present ICC, or associated with this.

The DACADU Project

Origin of the DACADU-Intercultural project

Based on the above-mentioned conceptual and organizational premises, the authors of this contribution decided to work together on ICC and to involve our respective students from the German language courses. Together with this purpose, we also intended to highlight the importance of German as a language of international communication, that is, not to conform to the

[5] https://ec.europa.eu

fact that English should always be the common language in areas and encounters not strictly national; and in this way, to appeal to the richness that comes from enjoying a greater linguistic variety, such as the one offered by the European context, which is an indisputable sign of cultural richness and diversity.

As a starting point, we lecturers from the Hochschule Darmstadt, the TU Dublin and the Technical University of Cartagena were inspired by an eloquent initiative: a *Logbuch*, or logbook, published by the *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung*.[6] One of the objectives of this official German organization is the integration of immigrants in German society, not only through the teaching of the language and culture of arrival, but also by establishing respectful and constructive comparisons with the cultures of origin. This is achieved by proposing oral and written activities presented in an open and creative way, and easy to adapt to different levels and ages.

From the methodological point of view, the Logbuch offered us introductory activities in the form of worksheets (for example, those entitled: *Wer bin ich, Mein erster Tag in Deutschland)* with which to develop oral and written tasks that, on the same basis of intercultural practice, were closer to the academic and professional context, that is, to the interests of our university students. Likewise, following the example of the suggestive title of the source material (*Neuland,* that is, New Land), we decided to entitle ours with an acronym derived from the initial letters of the three universities (DACADU), as well as with the inclusion of the key word for the whole subject (*Interkulturell*).

Objectives and methodology

The DACADU-Intercultural Project, as mentioned above, was conceived to develop the intercultural competence through the learning of German in a collaborative way, that is, by putting students from the three institutions in communication in order to solve a series of specific tasks related to interculturality. In addition, we would be promoting autonomous learning, contact between the different cultures and languages of origin of the participants and, of course, creativity. Given the "virtual" nature of the project, the concrete way of implementing this general objective has adopted most of the possible forms that digital communication allows us, both oral and written, combined with face-to-face (the traditional classroom), and in all its possible variations: telematic meetings among lecturers, between lecturers and students, and among students in working groups through various platforms; use of social networks by students and according to their choice (Whatsapp, Instagram, email); individual writing of assigned tasks for students; correction of

[6] https://www.bpb.de/shop/materialien/thema-im-unterricht/228373/logbuch-neuland/

written assignments by teachers; recording of videos in the students' working groups with feedback provided by the students themselves; and evaluation of partial and final results through surveys prepared by teachers.

Finally, all the results have been published week after week in a blog created for this purpose, initially restricted to the people involved in the activity, but with the ambition (with express consent) to make it known to the general public after the end of the project.[7]

Unlike the Logbook we were inspired by, which includes ready-to-solve activities, for our project we decided to introduce in our respective classes simple instructions on the tasks to be developed and on a weekly basis, with the aim of having the students themselves produce content, both written and audiovisual, rather than simply completing already given assignments. As such content was added to the blog, the new required tasks fed back into the content already posted, so that students had to refer back to the contributions of their group mates from previous weeks in order to make further progress. In this way, the written assignments became reading exercises, while at the same time expanding the mutual knowledge of interests and experiences among the participants. In addition, the prospect of having their own contributions published made the students take on a higher responsibility in terms of correction.

Team- and work dynamics

The project involved 6 students from the UPCT of Spanish nationality, between 8 and 10 students from the Hochschule Darmstadt from India, Serbia, and Russia, and between 6 and 8 students from the TU Dublin of Irish nationality, although some of them had roots in other countries (Czech Republic, Rumania, and the Philippines). The participants from Cartagena were studying a degree in Tourism, had A1-A2 language level, and for them German was their second or third foreign language after English and French; those from Darmstadt were mostly studying Engineering Degrees and/or Masters' Degrees in Communication, and had a B1 level since they were integrated in the university system of the country; all of them spoke several languages. The Dublin students were also multilingual, students of an International Bachelor's Degree in Business Economics, and had an A2-B1 level of the language. In addition to the German students, the Hochschule Darmstadt brought in two international students from Masters' programs related to digital communication to be responsible for the development of the blog.

For the group work, 6 teams were designed with at least one student from each university, in

[7] https://interculturalblog-hda.de/

some cases two. After each lecturer explained in her own class sessions the corresponding activity for each week, the teams agreed on a meeting by social networks, watched each other by video and discussed the topics, and finally solved the written task individually, but incorporating the contributions taken from the group meeting. This was true for the first three sessions. The last task, however, consisted of recording a joint video from a script with content from the previous three weeks' contributions, in the form of short interviews among the participants. In all cases, the students sent the written exercises to the lecturers before uploading them to the blog, so that they could correct them.

Based on the design of common worksheets or *Arbeitsblätter*, each lecturer was free to include the presentation of the activities and the associated instructions in his or her own classroom dynamics as she wished. With students at the beginning levels, the previous workload, i.e., the input in the face-to-face classes, was obviously higher. Bearing in mind, however, that the contents of the subject of the Tourism degree course taken by the A1-A2 level students (German for tourism) already implicitly include the axes of interculturality, this inclusion was quite naturally made. The topics covered were the following:

-*Woche 1: Wer bin ich? Mein Alltag an der Hochschule.*
-*Woche 2: Mein erster Tag in Deutschland: Realität/Erfahrungen und Erwartungen. What is Germany for me?*
-*Woche 3: Vielfalt erleben: Individuell, in der Universität, in meiner Stadt.*
-*Woche 4: Hier sind wir: Erlebte Vielfalt.*

Obviously, each student's contribution has been validated, with a view to the blog, according to his or her starting level. Thus, writing on the same topic, differences in vocabulary and expression can be observed:

Contribution by a B1 student:

Wie und wo erleben Sie Vielfalt: In meiner DACADU-Gruppe

Die zwei Wörter, die Vielfalt in unserer Gruppe erklären: mehrsprachig und multikulturell.

Wegen der Mehrsprachigkeit sprechen wir alle viele Sprachen, und die zwei Sprachen, die uns näher zusammenbringen, sind Englisch und Deutsch. Eines Tages unterrichteten Agustin und Max mich in Spanisch. Das hat Spaß gemacht.

Contribution by an A2 Student:

Vielfalt ist für mich: Freunde von allen Altersgruppen und Bürger aus verschiedener Herkunft

Individuell

Ich habe viele Freunde von allen Altersgruppen, weil ich verschiedene Aktivitäten gemacht habe, z.B.: Ich habe in verschiedenen Restaurants gearbeitet, ich lerne auch Englisch und Deutsch nachmittags an der Sprachschule und es gibt dort Leute von verschiedenem Alter. Dank dieser Umstände bin ich persönlich sehr gewachsen.

Taking this disparity of levels into account, throughout the project the students were offered the possibility of using the language in which they could best understand each other for communication, even though the result of the task had to be in German. In fact, the lecturers gave absolute freedom to the way in which the groups decided to meet, coordinating only the introduction phase of the activity, the corrections, and the deadlines.

Observations on the content generated

Both in the introductory contents (the worksheets or *Arbeitsblätter* created by the lecturers based on examples taken from the Logbook) and in the entries that the students contributed to the blog, we encouraged the use not only of text and/or video, but also of images: both personal photographs and photographs taken from a publication to illustrate, for example, contrasts regarding diversity, as well as links to web pages, references to popular culture in the form of music, cinema, comics, soccer, etc.

Thus, to the same extent that German became the instrument for the practice of intercultural competence—an objective that we have never lost sight of, as a result but above all as a process in the working group meetings—, the tasks solved by the students have been reflecting, as an added value, what we understand today as digital creation: collaborative work and in process, the multimodal nature of the exercise—written but also audiovisual, with associated links and hypertexts—and, above all, the weight of writing/recording/producing not merely as a class exercise, but with a much higher projection.

In fact, the knowledge that the contents were going to be shared and published had a direct impact on the motivation towards language learning and on the will to "succeed", both in

writing—focusing on grammatical and spelling correction—and orally—taking care of pronunciation and intonation—, as well as trying, despite the differences in level, to keep the level of the contributions of other classmates, who have not ceased to support each other. This motivation, directly related to the increase in personal responsibility, has gone beyond the urgency of the traditional utilitarian purposes—passing the subject or acquiring rudimentary or intermediate knowledge of the language—to become something more: it has become a living language, a language in use and applied to purposes that are not simulated but authentic. The individual benefits, both personal and linguistic, of the project will be addressed in the evaluation section.

Phases of the project

The project has been developed throughout the second four-month period of the academic year 2021/2022 according to a scheme that, in principle, may seem short—only 4 weeks of effective work in the form of content contributions, plus an extra week after the Easter vacations to complete the recording of the group videos because it is a task of greater complexity than the previous ones. However, the preparatory work, including the presentation to the students with the desire to give clear instructions, as well as the subsequent evaluation activities, have considerably extended the time of effective work and participation. The different phases, as a whole, were as follows:

Phase 1: Online meetings of the responsible teachers for the creation of the project: formulation and delimitation of objectives, sequencing, design of teaching materials in shared documents.

Phase 2: Establishment of working groups of 3-4 members with at least 1 student from each center, with a different native language and, in many cases, with different levels of the language; initial Zoom meeting with all participants for the presentation of the project and all participants.

Phase 3: Implementation of the project: over several weeks, the work scheme was repeated (introduction of the topic and the task in class; working group meetings; correction of the task; publication on the blog). In addition, a weekly hour of tutoring via Teams (*Sprechstunde*) with one of the lecturers of the project was given offering the possibility for students to ask any queries they may have in both English and German.

Phase 4: Conducting evaluation surveys. A partial survey was introduced after Week 2, for the coordination and testing of the collaborative activity around the concept of diversity (*Vielfalt*). A much more comprehensive survey was commissioned at the end of phase 3, basically for the measuring of the students' level of satisfaction and the tips for further improvement.

These four phases have been feeding each other with frequent meetings among lecturers and incorporation or modification of materials; exchange of impressions with students inside and outside the classroom, in groups or individually; and mid-project surveys such as the one, already mentioned, that was developed around the theme of the second week (*Was ist Deutschland für mich?*), as a follow-up and support material for the activity corresponding to that week.

As a conclusion to the students' involvement in the project, the task programmed for Week 4 introduced new elements of reflection and feedback on the previous collaborative work, while it took a new step, from written to audiovisual format. Students were asked to revise the previous entries from their group partners and elaborate a joint interview, with questions and answers and a short discussion about the different ways in which they all dealt with diversity, interculturality, and inclusion.

Observations, preliminary conclusions, and future perspectives

Although the final evaluation survey is still in progress at the time of submitting this paper, some data can already be extracted. The creation of the blog as a visible result composed of student content is cited in the survey as the greatest attraction of the project, rated with the maximum score of 5. The intrinsic motivation of participants exceeds 85%. Approximately 60% disagree with the relationship between their personal motivation and the grade for the course, while almost 95% confirm that their main motivation was "the desire to improve intercultural competence by collaborating with others". The individual comments of the participants also have an impact on this:

> *'The DaCaDu Project was an excellent experience [ ] The DaCaDu project was very well organised with clear assignments and pre organised groups. I would definitely recommend this project to future students if the possibility arises'.*
>
> *'I would like to have been able to do a few more posts because writing them and supplying pictures was really fun.*

> *‘I was motivated to be a part of this project for two reasons - cultural learnings through students across Europe and improve my German. I am very content with the quality of activities that were given which enabled me to actively learn about each other’.*
> *‘This experience has been helpful in different ways. I learnt German by speaking with my partner and I was helped by her anytime I needed. I learnt a lot from her and I loved hearing and sharing experiences. I also like the way this project is being developed but I consider that it should be longer’*

Although the final evaluation survey is still in progress at this moment, some data can already be extracted. The creation of the blog as a visible result composed of student content is cited in the survey as the greatest attraction of the project, and rated with the maximum score of 5. The intrinsic motivation of the participants exceeds 85%. About 60% do not agree with the relationship between their personal motivation and the course grade, while almost 95% confirm that their main motivation was "the desire to improve intercultural competence by collaborating with others".

Due to deadline limitations, this paper cannot analyze the final statistical results of the survey in depth yet, in spite of the partial pieces of information included. Concerning the content evaluation of the project (vocabulary and expression), given the different starting levels of the students in each institution, each lecturer designed specific evaluation tools within the limits of their respective course description units, learning objectives, programmed exams, etc.

As a complement to the work done, the Hochschule Darmstadt has offered to host a real meeting in October 2022, so that all participants can get to know each other personally. To coordinate this, the teachers have published an extra task on the blog (*Wir reisen ab!*), in which the students will have to put into practice a topic common to all of them in their learning of German: how to give directions and talk about means of transport. Obviously, motivation in this respect is at a maximum, since this is a real task, not a classroom exercise. With the DACADU meeting in Darmstadt, the project enters another phase, with future meetings in Cartagena and in Dublin. It remains to be seen whether such an activity can be transferred to other educational contexts, both within and outside higher education, without ever losing sight of the promotion of German language teaching, and with the added value of intercultural competence.

Limitations of the project

The possibilities offered to the lecturers in the incipient phases, that is, while the project was being conceived, were multiple: Should we include the three official languages from the universities

involved—English, Spanish, and German—or focus only on one of them? Should we involve full groups of students in our ongoing courses, or offer it only for students who voluntarily agreed to take part in the project? What did we want to achieve, and how? How long would the project last? Which specific contents would we like to impart?

Little by little, we managed to draft a program that included all the four sensibilities and proposals. Since the available time was short—the second term of the 2021-2022 academic year—, we chose to focus on just one language, and a reduced number of volunteering students. This means that the project cannot be, nor does it aim to, an accurate model for similar experiences in larger contexts, for which different issues may arise. In contrast, the attention to the students has always been close and quick in problem-solving terms, because their reduced number allowed for close accompaniment. The initial stage, for example—giving them clear instructions about what to do and how to proceed—took some time until all the participants incorporated the spirit and expected outcomes, duly scheduled, to their own study routines.

As for the topics chosen for the tasks, they could evidently have been more varied if we had had more time available. Apart from academic and everyday life, cultural diversity, and the introduction to the German culture, it would have been desirable to tackle other issues such as sustainability, social engagement, work, and world challenges, among many others. This circumstance leaves the project open to either a second phase with the same students, or a more comprehensive edition with larger numbers of participants and lecturers. Once the final step of evaluation is completed, for which a thorough discussion must be carried out, the project will surely adopt either of these plausible directions.

Dissemination initiatives

Once the pilot phase of the project has finished, the lecturers are taking time to present it in international forums and journals, mainly under the EUt+ frame. There have already been submissions and events, and some others are underway, in the three countries of the three universities involved: Germany, Ireland, and Spain.

If academic dissemination is important, student dissemination must be addressed as well. The blurring of limits between academic and non-academic input propitiated by digital communication as a more and more common practice in Higher Education has of course its counterpart in the new channels available to our students. i.e., social networks—either professional or private—through which they help spread links, news items, videos, contributions, or any other materials created and edited by them regarding the project. This way, students take up individual and group responsibility for the visibility of their results, as they had previously done in their workgroups—

deciding when to meet, how to discuss the topics assigned, what to post after that, etc. In addition, this part of the project keeps group engagement alive for a longer time than the one structured by the lecturers. Consequently, the time frame of the activity, as it had already happened concerning the space frame, is extended for the right purposes. Learning communities are thus forged and projected, and leave the path open for future encounters or collaborations outside the project itself among participants, mostly spontaneously.

Conclusions

So far, the focus of the present article has been kept on the concept of ICC. However, the second part of its title is “A Path Towards Inclusion.” In this regard, we aim to relate the experience presented with one of the topics included in the rise2020 Conference: “Explore the impact of different cultural contexts that shape higher education transformation today, and the creation of strategies, policies and plans for an equitable, inclusive and sustainable model of higher education.” The transformation of a class activity into something larger, more diverse, and with the goals already stated, has no doubt led to a higher awareness of the importance of interculturality in our diverse societies, for the lecturers no less than for the students.

There is also an organizational issue that must not go unnoticed, although it can be alternatively be considered a limitation or simply a hint of the open, transversal nature of the project: The three universities involved differ entirely in the ways German courses are inserted in their study plans, as well as in their learning objectives. For the students in Darmstadt, whose every-day and academic life depended basically on a fast acquisition of the language fundamentals, the learning pace was crucial. For the students in Dublin and in Cartagena, German was their first or second –sometimes third—option of a foreign language. In the case of the Dublin students, the “International” side of their degree (International Business Economics) makes the study of languages all the more relevant. As for the Tourism students in Cartagena, the characteristics of the tourism industry in the area—formed mainly by British and German customers—equally call for a thorough foreign language training and, more specifically, in the language teaching variety of LSP (Language for Specific Purposes). In the latter case, however, the subject is simply offered as an elective course, and its scarce number of weekly teaching hours does not allow for a quick advance. Moreover, the Spanish circumstances offer a few particular features: German is a foreign language scarcely demanded by learners outside very concrete environments, such as the Balearic Islands. From this perspective, working with Higher Education students of German in

Spain seems a correct path towards employability, while it points at the need for linguistic diversity further than simply spreading EFL (English as a Foreign Language).

Bearing all these factors in mind, the willingness with which all the students from the three institutions agreed to meet tight deadlines, hold weekly meetings and present results within the DACADU proposal, reinforces the value of the experience as a highly inclusive one: alongside the linguistic and intercultural factors, and notwithstanding the shortcomings, it has certainly improved autonomy, leadership, creativity, teamwork, and empathy, among other interpersonal skills. The opportunities that the EUt+ program offers to all of us for these and any other similar initiatives, easily scalable and implementable thanks to the use of IT resources and teaching-learning methods such as blended learning, and according to methodological strategies such as digital communication, should and must be brought to the forefront. Their contribution to the creation of international learning communities based on mutual respect for differences, collaborative work, motivation for challenge and, above all, a genuine curiosity towards the uses of this world, is already fostering inclusion and setting aside misunderstanding or prejudice. More importantly, it is certainly paving the way for more efficient future working communities in all knowledge areas, and all of it, thanks to the focus on interculturality.

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