

## **DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL AND MULTILINGUAL COMPETENCE WITH TOURISM STUDENTS AND EMPLOYEES IN THE SOUTH OF SERBIA<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In recent years Serbia is experiencing an increase in tourism flow which, besides its benefits, enjoins enforcement of measures which are to enable provision of the best possible service and enhancement of competitiveness. Tourism workers of today must possess not only adequate tourism related knowledge but also skills needed for intercultural communication. Multilingual and intercultural competences are becoming key characteristics of successful tourism professionals. This paper aims at promoting and raising awareness on the importance of developing both intercultural and multilingual competence in the area of tourism, catering and hospitality particularly in the south of Serbia. Analyzing the performance of tourism employees participating in English for tourism courses realized in the implementation of the Tempus project MHTSPS<sup>2</sup> and HBSL<sup>3</sup> tourism students' study requirements, the paper demonstrates the need for immediate action in developing the above mentioned skills.

**KEY WORDS:** intercultural competence, multilingual competence, tourism industry, communication, foreign languages

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<sup>1</sup> Review paper

<sup>2</sup> Modernization and harmonization of Tourism study programs in Serbia“-544543-TEMPUS-1-2013-1-1-RS-TEMPUS-JPCR.

<sup>3</sup> Higher Business School Leskovac

## INTRODUCTION

21<sup>st</sup> century can be, among other things, called the century of tourism. According to UNWTO (2016 Annual Report) number of international tourists has reached the staggering 1.2 billion; the number is expected to reach 1.8 billion in 2030. Of course, an increase in the number of tourists implies other changes. Tourism of today accounts for 10% of world GDP, 7% of global trade and 1 in 10 jobs.<sup>4</sup> OECD data (Organization for economic co-operation and development) on number of tourism enterprises and employment in this industry show a constant increase in these two categories from 2008 onwards. The latest Eurostat reports related to tourism sector show that tourism industries currently employ 12 million people in EU. In view of the previously stated facts, globalization and global nature of tourism and hospitality industry, it is obvious that interpersonal interactions between individuals of different cultural background and different nationality are bound to continue, occurring ever more often than they did before. Numerous researchers have pointed out the importance of well-developed intercultural competence with tourism and hospitality workers and several studies analyzed the effect of intercultural sensitivity on employee performance in cross-cultural service encounters showing better performance of employees with high level of intercultural sensitivity in comparison to employees with low level of intercultural sensitivity (Seymond D. & Constanti P. 2002, Sizoo S., Iskat W., Plank R. & Serrie H. 2003, Taylor M. & McArthur L., 2009, Suh E., West J.J. & Shin J. 2012, Yao-Yi F., 2015., etc.). In 2017, Serbia, as reported in World Economic Forum's "Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2017" welcomed around 1,1 million of international tourists with an international tourism inbound receipts of US \$1,048.4 million. While tourism in Serbia continues to grow (new Tourism development strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2016 –2025, fiscal reforms, investments in hotel capacities, transport infrastructure and international image of Serbia have contributed to creation of a favorable environment for the tourism industry), the above mentioned WEF 2017 report states that Serbia is still struggling with international openness (ranking 106 out of 136 analyzed countries). This particular data together with global trends lead us to discuss the intercultural and multilingual competence

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<sup>4</sup>UNWTO Annual Report 2016 Retrieved from  
[http://cf.cdn.unwto.org/sites/all/files/pdf/annual\\_report\\_2016\\_web\\_0.pdf](http://cf.cdn.unwto.org/sites/all/files/pdf/annual_report_2016_web_0.pdf)

with tourism students and employees in Serbia (particularly the south of Serbia) and point out the importance of possessing such professional competence.

#### INTERCULTURAL AND MULTILINGUAL COMPETENCE

Term *intercultural competence* is undoubtedly one of the most complex and problematic ones. Until recently, there existed a great confusion on what this term actually entails. Multilingualism, international communication, transcultural competence, global competence and citizenship, cross-cultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity are only some of the terms that were, in many cases, used in relation to or interchangeably with intercultural competence. In 2006, Deardorff proposed a model of intercultural competence consisting of 15 components divided in 4 (interrelated) categories: attitudes, knowledge & comprehension, desired external outcome and desired internal outcome. Moreover, Deardorff proposed a definition of intercultural competence saying that intercultural competence is “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2006:247). According to Byram (2000), intercultural competence includes knowledge, attitude, discovery and interaction skills, interpretation and relating skills and critical awareness of a culture. In FLL, it has been defined as a form of ability of a person to behave adequately and in a flexible manner when confronted with attitudes, expectations and actions of representatives of foreign cultures (Meyer, 1991). What all these definitions have in common is this “element” of communication which links intercultural competence with foreign language learning and multilingual competence. Namely, the development of intercultural competence involves intercultural training and exchange of ideas but foreign language learning plays a vital role in this process. Learning several languages additionally facilitates development of intercultural competence. Multilingual competence enables high-quality information and opinion exchange (Sindik & Bozinovic, 2013) between an even greater number of members of different cultures and thus paves way to quicker development of intercultural competence (which is a rather slow process due to its complexity). Moreover, multilinguals are said to possess increased metalinguistic awareness, greater creativity and cognitive flexibility and more diversified mental abilities (Cook, 1995) which greatly influence the

development of key competencies<sup>5</sup> defined by European Reference Framework for key competencies for lifelong learning. Many of these competences form part of professional competences for tourism specialists. Luka (2009) claims that tourism specialists' professional activity competence consists of cognitive competence, personal competence (including intercultural competence) and technologically-professional competence.

#### TOURISM PROFESSIONALS AND STUDENTS IN THE SOUTH OF SERBIA

In order to respond to market needs and act according to the set aims of the existing Strategy for education development in Serbia 2020, Higher Business School of Professional Studies in Leskovac takes active participation in number of international projects and constantly searches for new ways of connecting with different economic entities. As part of the Tempus project "Modernization and harmonization of tourism study programs in Serbia" 544543-TEMPUS-1-2013-1-1-RS-TEMPUS-JPCR, HBS in Leskovac, as one of the partner institutions has organized and conducted foreign language trainings (English language skills training). Training attendees were HBSL staff (teaching and non-teaching staff) as well as representatives of non-academic project partners (stakeholders with which a successful cooperation was established in the course of Project realization). The trainings took place at HBSL and part of the trainings was realized via a well-known online learning platform EDMODO. Course for non-academic project partners - *English for Tourism*, aimed at developing linguistic and communicative competence in English language as well as developing intercultural competence and thus raising awareness of its importance for tourism workers in Serbia. English for Tourism course was attended by 17 people (7 man and 10 women) where the majority of the participants were employees of Tourism Organization of Leskovac and 2 participants were employees of local travel agencies. 14 course participants speak one foreign language (English) and only 3 speak two foreign languages (English/Russian, English/German). English language teacher organizing and conducting the training was able to perform a necessary training needs analysis

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<sup>5</sup>Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, digital competence, learning-to-learn, interpersonal, intercultural and social competences and civic competence entrepreneurship and cultural expression.

and thus select the appropriate materials which suited the needs of the target audience. In relation to intercultural competence, English language teacher conducting the training used European Language Portfolio as a self-assessment tools of intercultural competence. The European Language Portfolio was distributed to all participants of the course who were then asked to fill it out at home and bring a copy of it to the teacher for analysis. While the course participants were strongly encouraged to fill out the form, not many of them did that (4 participants handed in their Portfolio) so that teacher had to look for information directly from the participants (oral interviews).<sup>6</sup>Data collection in this case was limited by the duration of the course (in line with Project framework) and course objectives defined in Project implementation guidelines. The analysis of collected data on intercultural competence (together with the needs analysis and determined level of foreign language knowledge) showed that course attendees feel that they do not have any problem communicating with people of different culture i.e. coping with both their spoken and body language, misunderstandings and different sense of humor or different formalities in the workplace in their home country. Course attendees claim to be “mostly” aware of the topics that in particular cases need to be avoided and that they are able to handle situations involving “cultural” incidents. While the majority of course attendees has travel to several foreign countries either for work or pleasure (countries such as Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, Macedonia, Croatia, Poland, Great Britain, Germany, USA, etc.) only one of the course attendees reported spending time spent living abroad (long term stay). This participant claimed that his stay in the USA has had him integrate some of the values of American culture and work-related habits. When asked to describe an intercultural encounter, one course attendant explained her encounter with the British culture. She wrote:

*“I knew Brits were famous for their queuing but I was shocked to see how serious they are about it.... Amazing. This is not possible in Serbia.”*

This participants also explained that she was rather taken aback when a British host failed to pay for a dinner he organized for his Serbian guests:

*“...we ended up paying for his part of the meal. And that’s a host! And it was very expensive. Everything is expensive in England.”*

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<sup>6</sup>It is assumed that some of the reasons that course participants were unwilling to hand in their European Language Portfolio were level of English language knowledge (lack of language confidence), lack of language learning (or professional) motivation and problems related to course attendance (busy work schedules and other obligations).

In an oral interview, another course participants said:

*“I like Bulgarians. They are similar to us. It’s easy to make arrangements with them...they always respond to our invitations to come to Leskovac...”*

In line with the topics selected for the course (business etiquette, negotiations, solving problems, offering information, etc.) teacher used different types of materials (texts, videos, presentations, critical incident cards, culture assimilator exercises, role play) to have the participants recognize, acknowledge and discuss the cultural differences (as opposed to personal traits) that might contribute to particular problems or misunderstandings. The activities were also aimed at boosting the level of comprehension of diversity existing among members of different culture and enable culturally appropriate behavior in similar situations. In performing these activities, participants demonstrated high level of self-awareness of their own cultural values but in many cases failed to make a distinction between stereotyping and prejudice and lacked knowledge on cultural values, characteristics of both verbal and non-verbal communication even in cultures similar to their own or to those that they had contact with. The overall conclusion, based on all acquired data related to intercultural competence of this language course participants, is that while they feel ready and willing to “play a role” in different intercultural scenarios, it is questionable how well they would perform in complex situations especially involving representatives of cultures that significantly differ from Serbian culture. It is therefore important that tourism workers in the south of Serbia receive additional training both in terms of vocabulary and grammar and intercultural communicative competence. Participation in international projects and programs and the increasing number of international events (Rostiljjada, Leskovac Carneval, Leskovac Summer festivals, and numerous events in organization of Leskovac Cultural Center) as well as its proximity to Nis (with a constantly increasing number of international tourists) will most certainly put to a test tourism workers in the south of Serbia in relation to their level of intercultural and multilingual competence.

There are numerous reasons to support the development of intercultural and multilingual competence with tourism students. Besides the factor of personal development and growth, students of tourism in the south of Serbia (and for that matter anywhere) are future tourism and hospitality employees. As such they have the responsibility of possessing key characteristics for effective communication in an intercultural setting. A research conducted by Tomka et. al. (2015), showed that tourism employers in Serbia want their employees to possess skills related to electronic (business) communication, social networks

marketing, reservation systems knowledge and excellent command of several foreign languages. Mayo and Thomas-Haysbert (2005) believe that effective communication skills are among mayor competencies needed from hospitality and tourism management graduates. A study conducted by Ineta Luka et. Al (2013) showed that tourism and hospitality students find skills such as language skills, ability to work in a multicultural team and an ability to communicate with clients and colleagues as most important skills to possess. Still, the results of Lolli's studies (2013a: 297, 2013b:364) conducted among young hospitality leaders show that graduates do not feel prepared to be competent communicators.

In the particular case of Higher Business School of Leskovac (with study programs Tourism and Hospitality and Management of Food Technology and Gastronomy) the importance of developing intercultural and multilingual competence is even greater then perhaps in some other cases. Namely, the majority of students enter their first year of study with knowledge of only 1 foreign language and with little or no intercultural competence. Lack of confidence, knowledge and awareness of differences that exist among Serbian and other cultures makes entry students unprepared to act appropriately in an international setting. Still, HBSL provides numerous opportunities for these students to become better "intercultural communicators." Namely, both of the above mentioned study programs are prepared in such way as to include tourism/hospitality specialization courses, language courses as well as student's internships (practical work experience). HBSL's participation in the previously mentioned MHTSP Tempus project, Erasmus+ KA107 Practical Education – Bridge between education and labor market program and numerous other projects with several foreign partners (from Norway, Slovenia, Macedonia, Greece, Romania, Belgium, Bulgaria, etc.) have enabled the modernization of existing study programs. Study programs' contents, teaching methods and training programs are now all in line with European higher education standards thus providing the students with an opportunity to obtain cultural knowledge and experience and develop cultural awareness and sensitivity. Numerous internship programs (both domestic and abroad) providing "real-life" practice are organized throughout an entire school year and available to students of all study years. Each study year, more than 300 HBSL students participate in some of the offered practical training programs. As an independent higher education institution, HBSL has applied for Erasmus Charter for Higher Education thus contributing to the process of internationalization of Serbian higher education

and providing itself the opportunity to participate in Erasmus+ programs involving staff and student mobility and exchange. Preparing for Erasmus Charter, HBSL formed an Office for projects and international cooperation which is, among other things, in charge of managing and implementing European and international student/staff mobility programs. The Office team commits itself to cooperate with the existing practical training coordinators in the School and provide adequate (integration) preparation for all outgoing and incoming mobility students. The experience of students who have already went through some practical training program (regularly recorded) is helpful in providing information on which segments of their preparation for such an endeavor (and mobility programs) HBSL staff should additionally improve.

#### CONCLUSION

In a world of continuous globalization and constant movement there is no escaping intercultural contacts and communication, especially in the field of tourism and hospitality. With a prediction of 1.8 billion international tourists by 2030, all tourism destinations should invest the greatest possible effort in “producing” tourism employees aware of the wide range of different customs and cultures. Intercultural and multilingual competence are shifting from bonus skills to necessary requirements of all tourism employees (both current and future ones). Serbia is starting to take advantage of the potential it has in the field of tourism and hospitality but in order to fully realize it, it has to invest in tourism staff which has to improve its skills related to intercultural communication. The data collected during the realization of English for tourism course (part of MHTSPS Tempus program in Serbia) are indicative of the current situation in relation to intercultural and multilingual competence and show the necessity of further professional development of tourism employees in the south of Serbia, particularly of those employed in the public sector institutions (responsible for the development of south of Serbia as a tourist destination). Further research should include greater sample and propose (explain in greater detail) practical measures for developing intercultural/multilingual competence of tourism and hospitality employees.

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