

III. PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF DISTANCE LEARNING. DISTANCE LEARNING IN HUMANITIES

E-LEARNING IN CULTURE STUDIES INSTRUCTION – DESIGNING, IMPLEMENTING AND EVALUATING A STUDY PROGRAMME

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***Abstract:** The aim of the article is to reflect upon the process of designing an online course aimed at familiarising foreign language learners with the basics of culture of target language countries, which are often the destination of Erasmus mobility visits. The course “NIE TAKI ERASMUS STRASZNY...” (Don’t be that scared of Erasmus...) was targeted at students planning to make a foreign visit within the Erasmus+ framework, who have achieved the necessary proficiency level and who are willing to expand their intercultural knowledge and skills to accommodate better to a new linguistic-cultural reality. The paper is composed of three main parts, which contain reflections on the design of the course, a detailed discussion of all the stages of its development and the final evaluation of the course reviewer.*

Keywords: e-learning, foreign language teaching/learning, developing Intercultural Communicative Competence, Erasmus+ programme

1. INTRODUCTION

Erasmus+ programme, which continues the well-known Erasmus framework over the years 2014-2020, is one of the most recent schemes approved of by the European

Parliament for “education, training, youths and sports”. One of the challenges it faces is “developing social capital of young people, strengthening their position and abilities to participate actively in the society, according to the regulations of the Treaty of Lisbon towards ‘encouraging youths to participation in democratic life of Europe’ (European Commission, 2013: 9). The implementation of this objective in member states of the European Union can have different forms. The one point in common is setting up partnerships between particular EU higher education institutions and organizing student exchanges within these partnerships.

Ever since the *Erasmus* (currently *Erasmus+*) framework was introduced, the opportunity to follow a part of one’s study programme at a foreign university has been highly appreciated by Polish students. Many of them found such a visit the first occasion to get in touch with authentic use of a particular foreign language in natural communicative contexts. In fact, this demands not only confident use of the target language system, but also knowledge and skills of using the rules of its social and cultural functioning. Thus, providing students who are planning an *Erasmus+* trip to English- or French-speaking countries with information and skills within this area has become the main objective of the course *NIE TAKI ERASMUS STRASZNY...* The course was designed as a collection of open-access e-learning modules within the framework of *UPGOW – University as a Partner of a Knowledge-Based Economy*, realized by the University of Silesia and funded from the European Union.

2. DESIGN OF THE COURSE

The implementation of e-learning as a method of teaching and learning foreign languages, in its broad sense, has become a highly popular solution among teachers willing to enrich their foreign language teaching toolkit. On the other hand, as far as students are concerned, getting access and exposure to multimedia teaching aids designed specifically for foreign language study has become a widespread way of improving foreign language proficiency. Moreover, availability of a wide range of computer-based and online educational tools facilitates authoring different forms of interactive resources (ranging from single quizzes to fully-fledged e-learning courses). These are varied not only in terms of forms and methods of work, but also selected contents, use of authentic language input and wide context of the target culture.

The course *NIE TAKI ERASMUS STRASZNY...* is one of the examples of how to apply the methods and techniques of distance learning in foreign language teaching and learning. It has been designed for intermediate+ students (B2 or higher according to Common European Framework of Reference levels, CEFR, 2003). As is the case with other language courses, one of the main objectives of the course is the development of linguistic and communicative competences at a selected level. The course focuses, apart from that, on fostering intercultural competence within the target language. It is on purpose that ICC is the starting point for both course

syllabus and its specific contents since, as evidenced by contemporary researchers (see, for instance, Mackiewicz, 2005 or Wilczyńska, 2009), intercultural competence, also known as transcultural competence, is regarded as a key to successful communication in a foreign language. Without it, “effectiveness of TL communication can be hindered” (Mackiewicz, 2005: 10). Generally speaking, intercultural competence is viewed as “the ability of a learner to behave appropriately and skillfully in contact with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures” (Banach, 2003: 3). Thus, it encompasses not only linguistic competence as such (or, according to the CEFR terminology, ‘linguistic communicative competences’), but also so-called ‘general competences’, which are connected more or less directly with the language itself and are applied by its users in diverse everyday life situations. General competences encompass a wide range of knowledge, practical skills, individual personality factors or learning skills (see CEFR, 2003). Out of all the above-mentioned factors shaping general competences the ones that seem to have the greatest impact on the development of intercultural competence seem to be the following:

- 1) sociocultural knowledge – viewed as ‘knowledge of the society and culture of the target language community’,
- 2) intercultural sensitivity – defined as ‘knowledge, awareness and understanding of relations (similarities and differences) between the source language community and the target language community’,
- 3) intercultural skills, encompassing “the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other”; “cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures”; “the capacity to fulfil the role of cultural intermediary between one’s own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations” as well as “the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships” (CEFR, 2001: 104-105).

Thus, if we are to sum up the discussion above, many researchers see the concept of intercultural competence as “a perfect knowledge of target language and culture” (Wilczyńska, 2005: 22) and attribute to it a major role in all sorts of contacts between native and non-native users of a particular language. The latter, for instance, may fail to apply the form of the linguistic message to the status of the interlocutor, which results in restricting or even abandoning interaction with such a person. Lack of knowledge of certain patterns of behaviour characteristic of a particular culture or the reality of using a given language can lead to misunderstandings, communicative and interactive mishaps. This, in turn, can trigger fear of interacting in the target language or even apprehension in contacts with specimens of the target culture.

These are the reasons why developing intercultural competence has become one of the most essential components of contemporary foreign language methodologies and

has gained great prominence in situations in which a learner is going to face the necessity to use one's language skills in everyday life interactions within the target language community while becoming its member for a shorter or longer period of time. Such opportunities are brought about by *Erasmus+* visits, which require not only necessary language proficiency, but also familiarity with the basics of the reality of the target culture. Providing such information and giving opportunities for acquiring that kind of competence have been the foundation of the course *NIE TAKI ERASMUS STRASZNY....* The course has been targeted at students planning a visit to English- and French-speaking countries. Thus, the focus has been placed on showing the cultural reality of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as well as France, Belgium, Switzerland and Luxembourg. The major objective of its authors has become equipping course participants with information useful to adapt to and effectively function in the linguistic and cultural reality of the target community. The course contents encompass a wide range of areas of both public and private lives of a given community, as indicated during interviews with students of the Faculty of Modern Philologies of the University of Silesia who had participated in *Erasmus* student exchanges before. Based on the findings of interviews, nine thematic areas have been isolated as the backbone of the course:

- a) geography and geopolitics,
- b) social care system,
- c) healthcare system,
- d) education,
- e) social etiquette and manners in the culture of origin and the foreign culture,
- f) religion,
- g) holidays and special occasions,
- h) festivals and cultural events,
- i) national and cultural heritage.

All these topics were selected for inclusion in the syllabus to organize the course contents.

3. COURSE DEVELOPMENT

The development of the course was implemented within the project “*UPGOW University as a Partner in Knowledge-Based Economy*” contract number UDA-POKL.04.01.01-00-215/08-00, within the Operational Programme Human Capital co-financed from the European Social Fund, Priority IV Higher education and science, Action 4.1 Strengthening and developing the didactic potential of the university and increasing the number of graduates of faculties with key significance for knowledge-driven economy, Subaction 4.1.1. Increasing the didactic potential of

the university within Activity 46: “Developing and implementing curricula and didactic materials in distance learning”.



Figure 1. A screenshot from the UPGOW project platform

With such highly ambitious goals in mind, the course was planned to compose nine thematic modules (topics), each equivalent to 30 hours of effective student work on the platform. Each module was structured with a lead-in, pre-tests and tests, a glossary, varied input materials and learning activities. Each course was supposed to meet university standards and exploit the capacities of the e-learning platform, with a special focus on graphics, illustrations, pictures, training videos, together with the option of acquiring each part of the material in an interactive, varied and methodologically sound way.

The development of the course required making a bid for a didactic service in cooperation with the Public Procurement Division of the University. With a number of bidders competing, the winner was a consortium of companies PROFES and Edukacja.Online.pl, both with a wide experience of developing distance learning courses.

The course development process was divided into the following stages:

1. Detailed specification of topics within the designated thematic areas and thorough planning of lesson scenarios by foreign language teacher advisors.
2. On the basis of these, preparation of detailed guidelines for drafts of all the scenarios by e-learning methodologists.
3. Course upload to the platform by IT specialists.
4. Internal audit.

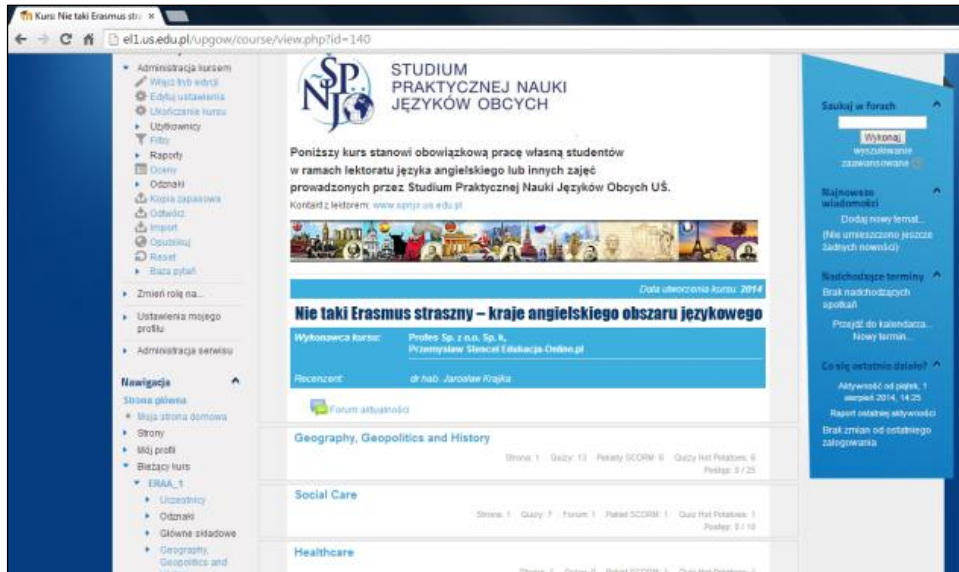


Figure 2. A screenshot of a title page of the course

The contractor was well aware of the fact that the ready-made course will be accepted only after a positive outcome of the methodological assessment by the external auditor commissioned by the University.

Apart from the language objectives directly related to the participation in the *Erasmus+* programme, the project team aimed at achieving the following benefits:

- *Increasing the attractiveness of the didactic offer of the University*

Most e-learning courses at higher education institutions are run in the blended learning mode and e-learning is used to supplement traditional face-to-face classes. This seems to be the right approach, as it combines maintaining the university tradition and direct relationship between the master and the apprentice with contemporary needs of youths accustomed to interacting in the cyberspace and gaining the knowledge of the world from the Web. Additionally, online availability of selected lectures can be a good promotional opportunity for a university by displaying examples of good practice, increasing students' awareness of e-learning and serving an important marketing purpose. The UPGOW platform has over 32,000 registered users, with more than a third using the resources actively. The users become more and more interested in the courses – for instance, in 2011 the portal was visited by over 48,000 unique users, in 2013 the number soared to 126,000. Over the first three months of 2014 the platform was visited by over 30,000 users. All this means that many students use resources of a number of different courses rather than just do a one-time course completion. When students register at a given module and see another appealing topic, they take up such elective courses.

- *Availability of resources with more and more prevalent online use beyond the University and the domicile*

The virtual learning environment is available regardless of the time of the day or place of residence of course participants, which is a significant benefit for extramural students or those who study two different faculties. Moreover, in the era of mobile devices one often uses the time of travel, commuting, relaxation or walking to study, acquire new information, revise or redo essential course components.

- *Learner autonomy in practice, given expected student skills*

Autonomy is a highly appreciated skill essential for fostering independence, self-control, good work organization. Thus, effective autonomy of students taking courses outside the University's premises or abroad is an absolute must. It is often the case that e-learning is a self-autonomous process under the facilitator's guidance, whose role is not limited to tutoring of all kinds, but also assists development of learners' creativity and personal development.

- *Support for participants with learning disabilities*

The virtual learning environment is available anytime and anywhere, moreover, each user can customise the layout of the course on their monitor to suit their perceptive abilities. Additional software can be used to read texts aloud. More and more challenged students use *Erasmus* study opportunities, and the contents of the described course features additional information relevant for such learners.

- *Creation of a quality model for future online courses*

The University of Silesia has 13 e-learning platforms (12 belonging to particular faculties and 1 inter-faculty one) set up before the UPGOW project commenced. The very project resulted in improving the quality of courses offered since many authors tried to follow the model standards established in the project. Quite a few authors of UPGOW courses used their newly acquired skills and experiences to expand the impact of their courses by uploading new resources to the faculty platforms and to the YouTube video sharing site. As evidenced by informal evaluative interviews with many authors, it was the UPGOW authoring experience that fully convinced them of the benefits of e-learning.

4. COURSE EVALUATION

The evaluation of an e-learning course takes into account the overall process of teaching and learning. In this respect an e-learning course serves a similar function to a foreign language coursebook – it is the final product of a number of decisions upon the shape of the learning process, the role of the learner, the degree of his/her autonomy, which all have to be taken by course authors in the moment of planning. It is due to this that the evaluation of the course „Nie taki Erasmus straszny – kraje

angielskiego obszaru językowego” takes into account the following aspects which add up to the methodology of teaching a foreign language at a distance:

- objectives and topics of the course,
- types of activities and ways in which lesson sequences are structured,
- roles of the teacher and learner,
- testing and assessment.

Obviously, the practical implementation of these four aspects is to a large extent influenced by the computer environment in which the course is to be designed (or, to be more specific, the e-learning platform selected to host the materials) on the one hand and the predicted mode of course application after its development on the other. Thus, the types of activities are determined by the capacities of a platform (either dedicated or ready-made, commercial or Open Source). The question whether more sophisticated, multi-staged, or multimedia-rich activities can be used depends on the degree to which the foreign language developers can influence the shape of the computer environment. The limitations of the selected platform can have a negative influence on the quality of the final product – in such a case language authors try to do what is actually feasible (or even worse, feasible and quickly done), not necessarily attempting to design activities and sequences that would be most effective at transmitting particular pieces of culture knowledge or could enable the development of given intercultural abilities.

4.1. Objectives and topics of the course

The course „Nie taki Erasmus straszny – kraje angielskiego obszaru językowego” was divided into nine modules, each comprising SCORM lessons, Moodle and Hot Potatoes quizzes as well as introductory pages:

1. Geography, Geopolitics and History
2. Social Care
3. Healthcare
4. Education
5. Manners
6. Religion
7. Holidays and special occasions
8. Festivals and cultural events
9. Heritage

The selection of topics well reflects the current understanding of culture as a concept encompassing both public institutions, items of geography, history, politics (termed ‘big C culture’ or ‘achievement culture’) and aspects of everyday life, with elements

of customs, habits, leisure activities, typical ways of travelling, to name just a few ('little c culture' or 'behaviour culture' – Stempleski, Tomalin, 1993). It is to be noted that in the evaluated course the latter area ('little c') gains prominence, which gives the course a more practical character and enables its users to acquire information necessary to function in everyday life in the target language countries. If this is to be the objective, the amount of detail needs to be significant (as it was in the case in the course), in order to exhaust the possible range of options.

The second decision to be taken in such a culture-oriented course, apart from the layer of culture to be addressed, is the geographical focus. In the course "Nie taki Erasmus straszny..." the authors narrowed down the concept of "English-speaking countries" to the parts of Great Britain (England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland or Republic of Ireland). While this is fully justified given the possible Erasmus+ student mobility destinations, such a limited view of the target culture impoverishes students' view and attitude. There is no reason why such English-speaking countries as the USA, Australia, Canada, New Zealand or Republic of South Africa (all belonging to the 'Inner Circle' of the English language – Kachru, 1990) should not be used in such a course, perhaps not to go into details, but to use them in comparison to the UK.

The final question to be resolved while designing a culture-oriented e-learning course is whether it is going to pass on culture-related information ('teach culture') or deal with all the three components of knowledge, skills and attitude ('develop intercultural competence'). The former approach, prevalent in the evaluated course, might be insufficient in the current reality, well focused on encompassing learners with skills of comparison, discovery, curiosity and openness towards other cultures. Thus, enriching each module with 1-2 reading comprehension activities, where texts are supposed to expose students to particular attitudes which are parts of Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, Planet, 1999; Byram, 1997; Byram, 2008) would greatly increase the impact of the course.

4.2. Structure of modules, types of activities, lesson sequence patterns

Course modules have a uniform structure both in terms of titles of components and types of resources. In most modules the number of resources is similar, which should be the case. The major components of each module are as follows:

- a. Introduction, with a brief listing of module objectives, a pre-test and a discussion topic,
- b. Lesson, made up of a certain number of facts spread over subpages, together with multimedia, all compiled into SCORM modules,
- c. Practice, with a considerable number of Moodle quizzes or HotPotatoes quizzes of different types (crosswords, gap-filling tasks, multiple-choice questions) exploiting multimedia (pictures or films) as prompts or input,

- d. Final test, limited in terms of number of attempts (only 1) and time (10 minutes).

While this structure would be typical of a number of school subjects, a question arises whether foreign language study does not need a different approach, in which the whole module would be divided thematically into a few mini-cycles, each comprising all the elements listed above relevant to the topic.

The introduction is a vital part of each module, as a learner needs to find out in advance what objectives are to be achieved, what details he or she will learn, what kinds of texts or forms of work will be used in the module and how much time to devote to working with it. A pre-test serves the purpose of a linguistic-cultural warm-up, necessary to activate conceptual structures and lexical expressions relevant to the module topic. It is also useful to add a discussion topic that would further stimulate learner reflection. Introductions, however, were not uniformed, and seemed to be a rather underestimated part of the course.

The major part of the module was a series of a multi-page lessons structured as SCORM packages. The pages introduce aspects of culture-related knowledge supported by pictures, videos, maps or additional information in speech bubbles. Users make their way through the lessons, solving particular close-ended tasks (matching, true-false, multiple-choice) and moving to consecutive screens in a linear fashion.

While attractive graphic design and skilful integration of texts with multimedia elements are strong sides of the lessons, the linear mode of work is a drawback, since it assumes the only way to proceed to the next screen is by solving a given one no matter how many times one tries. A more realistic mode of work would be allowing only a pre-defined number of activity attempts, after which assessment of answers, feedback and solutions would be displayed and the learner could move on. Also some alternative ways of navigating throughout the course contents could be used, rather than only linear progression through the lessons.

Lessons mainly focus on what is relatively easy to design and test, which is reading comprehension for details – however, other subskills of both reading and listening would have to be catered for to give learners a fully valid learning experience. As can be noticed in the course, lessons in different modules show quite considerable differences in the amount of texts and expected language proficiency level. Amount of coverage of topics and language level should be established in advance and adhered to throughout the whole course, unless, of course, it has been decided that the language level will be slowly rising towards the end of the course. Similarly, uniform policy of picture-text display (which elements where, how large in relation to each other) or text assessment mode (short question after each screen or longer tests after a series of pages) established before the course and applied throughout helps to maintain its professional nature.

The practice component of each module comprises a large number of multimedia-rich quizzes of different kinds (crosswords, matching, multiple choice, true/false), well suited to the kind of tested ability. Obviously, great care needs to be devoted to make sure quizzes are structured in a uniformed way (meaningful titles, target-language instructions, unlimited in terms of time or number of attempts).

The process of learning in the course „Nie taki Erasmus straszny – kraje angielskiego obszaru językowego” proceeds in the automatic mode, with no place for a teacher or facilitator, and with no contact with other learners. This is evidenced in the selection of Moodle activities, namely, content pages, audio and video files, automated lessons and close-ended quizzes. While the automated modules are well-structured and fulfill their purpose in the course, a question arises whether not to add a limited number of communicative activities (e.g., a forum at the start and at the end, or a journal upon completion of the module), in order to engage learners in human-human interaction and humanize the learning process to a greater extent. Moreover, out of the range of Moodle activities the glossary could be added to form a reference material accumulated throughout the course and be always accessible for look up. This would help to organize knowledge better and give learners a much quicker access to culture-related data.

4.3. Roles of learners and teacher, testing and assessment

The course „Nie taki Erasmus straszny – kraje angielskiego obszaru językowego” was shaped as a self-study e-learning unit, with students’ performance automatically graded. In this kind of course a student works with the materials, gives answers, gets them assessed and obtains feedback according to the predefined answer key. The role of the course designer, then, is to develop the materials, plan possibly comprehensively the range of responses to be given, add meaningful feedback messages and program the learning sequences.

The analysed course reflects this learning philosophy, varying different assessment modes based on the phase of the lesson. In the practice phase close-ended quizzes have an unlimited number of attempts and it is only the highest grade that is recorded in the gradebook. This enables the learner to retake the lesson as many times as is needed with no effect on the final grade, and, in this way, make sure the knowledge is internalized faster and is retained for a longer period of time. On the other hand, both the pre-test and the post-test have restrictions aiming at making the performance assessment more reliable. For the former, the number of attempts is limited to one only and restricted to a five-minute time limit. However, prior to the test the student is informed that the pre-test will have no influence on the final grade. On the other hand, the post-test can also be taken only once and has a time limit, but its results are recorded in the gradebook. While this distinction is appropriate to differentiate practice tests from pre-test and post-test, perhaps at least some of the practice tests in the module could use the average score assessment method. In this way, those students who need a smaller number of test attempts would be rewarded with a higher overall grade.

Obviously, the fully automated course mode necessitates heavy reliance on close-ended quizzes. However, since contemporary foreign language methodology emphasizes the concept of learner as a subject (rather than object) of assessment, suiting assessment techniques to learners' needs and involving them in the testing process could be accomplished by introducing at least some of the forms of alternative assessment to the course „Nie taki Erasmus straszny – kraje angielskiego obszaru językowego”. Contemporary Learning Management Systems such as Moodle offer a wide range of activities allowing the use of peer-assessment or self-assessment in the learning process (see Krajka, 2007; 2008; Marczak, Krajka, forthcoming). For instance, students could be involved in cooperating by assessing one another's posts in discussion forums, giving feedback on glossary entries or exercising self-assessment by filling a survey, writing journal entries or taking untimed and ungraded quizzes. While it might not be fully feasible to apply peer-assessment in a self-study e-learning course, providing opportunities for self-assessment would encourage the student to relate the knowledge, skills and attitudes gathered during the module to the objectives stated for it. At the same time, using journal writing systematically at the end of each module would help students develop written communicative competence, but also, what is more important, trigger reflection on the process of acquiring intercultural competence and expanding one's critical awareness. Skillful selection of topics and formulation of intriguing questions could also encourage learners to undertake a comparison between home and target cultures so as to acquire skills of interpreting and relating, skills of comparison, skills of discovery and interaction (Byram, 1997).

5. CONCLUSION

The course „Nie taki Erasmus straszny – kraje angielskiego obszaru językowego” answers a great need for teaching resources aiming at developing Intercultural Communicative Competence in foreign language instruction. A well-designed and neatly developed course is a valuable supplement to regular skill-oriented learning. While the limitations of the computer environment necessitate reliance on certain types of learning and testing tasks, future courses of this kind could be more flexible in terms of modes of use: self-study or teacher-guided, individual student-computer interaction or student-student interaction mediated by the computer. This could be done by expanding the range of communicative activities (forums, collaborative glossaries, individual journals). Also redefinition of the objectives would be necessary to address all the three major components of intercultural competence (knowledge, skills and attitude), without overemphasizing knowledge only. Once all these aspects are addressed, it seems such Erasmus-training courses would be a highly valuable element of practical education helping to function effectively in the everyday reality of a foreign country.

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