

Development of Students' Intercultural Competence at the Tertiary Level

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Abstract

The research deals with the development of students' intercultural competence as an integrative part of English for Special Purposes (ESP) competence. The aim of the research is to develop tourism students' intercultural competence in ESP studies. The target study group consists of nine students of the Faculty of International Tourism of the School of Business Administration *Turība*, Latvia. The following research methods were used: analysis of theoretical literature and sources, data collection methods (students' self evaluation, students' observations, students' tests and teachers' interviews), and quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods. The empirical study was conducted from 2003 to 2006. The results of the research showed a strong link between students' intercultural competence and language competence. The author of the study offers proposals on how to develop students' intercultural competence within language lessons.

Key words: ESP competence, intercultural competence, professional competence, culture

Introduction

The opening of Latvia's frontiers and the country's joining NATO and the EU have promoted the development of globalisation processes in the country. These socio-economic and political changes foster the development of many businesses. The tourism business has become one of the most flourishing businesses in the country. At present in Latvia there is a high demand for creative, decisive, educated specialists with a good command of English and excellent

cooperation skills. For tourism specialists it is essential not only to speak fluent English but also to recognize cultural and religious differences in different countries because tourism specialists have to serve international tourists from different nationalities and ethnic groups. They must know how to sell their product (holiday, tour, hotel, resort, catering services, etc.) in a manner acceptable to their guests. This is why tourism students must develop intercultural competence.

This paper describes the research process, analyses the gained results and makes suggestions concerning the development of students' intercultural competence as a part of the entire study dealing with the development of students' ESP competence formed by communicative language competence, intercultural competence and professional competence.

Competence for Tourism Specialists

Professional Competence for Tourism Specialists

An analysis of competence theories reveals that it is possible to define different approaches to competence theory. Historically competence has been associated with skills, qualification and abilities. The latest pedagogical literature describes *competence* as *an ideal of education* and *an analytical category* (Maslo I., Tilla, 2005; Maslo E., 2003; Maslo I., 2006; Tilla, 2003, 2005).

The researcher has chosen the latest approach to competence, which defines competence as “an individual combination of abilities and experience which is based upon the possibilities of gaining experience. In its process aspect, it develops all the time; as abilities develop throughout life, experiences develop and more and more new possibilities of gaining experience appear. Competence as a result is expressed in the quality level of a certain activity. Experience is defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and values acquired during one's life, personally positively evaluated, consolidated in habits and used for various activities and situations” (Tilla, 2003:55).

Tourism specialists have to be able to coordinate their work, solve different situations and use management skills (MacFarlane, 1999). These skills include the abilities to plan, learn, introduce innovations, adapt, motivate, manage and coordinate. Tourism specialists also must be creative and must be able to think logically and strategically, as they often have to solve unexpected situations. Experience has an essential role in motivation, work and in achieving results; therefore the definition of professional competence should also include experience and attitude. Thus I.Tilla's competence definition can be used as a basis to define *professional competence*. It has to include special knowledge necessary for the industry as well.

The author of this research defines *professional competence as an individual combination of gained experience, attitude and abilities developed on the basis of learning, which allows a specialist to think strategically, untraditionally implement knowledge, responsibly develop their industry, and creatively work in the chosen profession observing traditions and peculiarities of different cultures.*

Intercultural Competence for Tourism Specialists

The use of language is connected with the achievement of personal and professional goals, or professional growth. People's interaction in tourism occurs between members of different nationalities and ethnic groups. In order to promote a mutually understood cultural context, its understanding and appropriate action are important. As the aim of learning a foreign language is the ability to communicate, a speaker has to develop communicative competence. The notion of *communicative competence* has been used for more than 30 years. As a result many classifications have been created. The most popular ones also include the cultural aspect:

- M. Canale and M. Swain's classification of communicative competence includes grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competence. In this classification socio-cultural competence deals with socio-cultural and discourse rules (Canale, Swain, 1980);
- E. Tarone and G. Yule find that communicative competence consists of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence (an ability to use language according to a socio-cultural context) and strategic competence (Tarone, Yule, 1989);
- J. C. Orwig regards that communicative competence is formed by linguistic aspects (phonology and orthography; grammatical competence; lexical competence; discourse competence) and by pragmatic aspects (functional competence; sociolinguistic competence; interaction competence; culture competence), the latter being connected with language use in communicative situations to achieve the speaker's goals (Orwig, 1998).

Many scientists stress the importance of the cultural aspect of language learning, suggesting that knowledge about other cultures helps to learn a language and assess cultural values and peculiarities of the language learner's nation (Anisimova, 2006; Dirba, 2002; Ellis, 2005; Kim, & Hall, 2002; Korhonen, 2004; Stier, 2004; Williams, & Burden, 1999). Thus they admit the importance of *intercultural competence*.

According to M. Byram intercultural competence includes attitude, knowledge, interpretation and relating skills, discovery and interaction skills, and critical awareness of culture or political education (Byram, 2000).

Intercultural competence may be divided into two groups: content-competence and process-competence. Content-competence refers to "the *knowing that-aspects* of culture" (knowledge of history, language, behaviour, cultural norms, habits, customs, symbols, traditions, etc.). Process-competence refers to the dynamic character of intercultural competence and its

interactional context or “the *knowing how-aspect* of intercultural competence”. Process-competence consists of *intrapersonal competencies* (perspective alteration, self-reflection, role-taking, problem-solving, culture-detection and axiological distance) and *interpersonal competencies* (interpersonal sensitivity, communication competence and situational sensitivity) (Stier, 2006; 2004).

Intercultural competence includes an ability to see and understand differences in one’s own and other people’s cultures and countries, accept them and accordingly react, in conversation and behaviour, treating people in a way which is not offensive, scornful or insulting to the members of other cultures. At the same time it includes the knowledge of one’s own nation and culture, and an awareness of their value, their preservation and development. In learning the English language students also improve their knowledge about other countries and their culture, but it does not mean the automatic transfer of these cultures into the students’ native language and defaming and ignoring the cultural values of their own country and nationality.

Six different levels of culture can be distinguished. Three of them form the visible part of culture (the level of immediately observable symbols and symptoms, the structures that are difficult to observe, the governing morals, patterns and norms) and the other three levels form a more fundamental core culture, which is more hidden (the partially legitimating values, the generally accepted highest values and the fundamental philosophy of life) (Gullestrup, 2002).

When meeting a representative of another culture we observe them and get our first impression. If the first impressions about several representatives of the same culture are similar, we may form a stereotype. In most situations when we make closer contact with these persons, we find that the first impression of the culture was misleading. In order to form a true opinion about a representative of another culture, we have to understand both the horizontal and vertical dimensions.

Developing intercultural competence is a rather slow learning process, which includes learning a foreign language, intercultural training and gaining experience from meeting people of other cultures (Korhonen, 2004). Students also have to acquire theoretical and practical cultural knowledge, which can be done through intercultural communication.

Intercultural education is characterized by six 'i's and six 'c's. The six 'i's include: *intercultural* themes and examples, an *interdisciplinary* perspective, an *investigative* character, *integrated* study groups, *interactive* teaching methods, and *integrative* views where theory and practice are joined. The six 'c's are typical outcomes of intercultural education: *communicative* competence in at least two languages, *cooperative* competence, "professional *confidence*, self-confidence and their *commitment* to universal human rights", *critical thinking*, and "problems of *comparability* – to recognize the cultural relativity of reality and the non-transparent and contextual nature of cultural knowledge" (Stier, 2006:8).

The goal of intercultural education incorporates three stages: transformation of teachers themselves, transformation of the system of education and schools, and transformation of society (Kalnina, Petre, 2006). The teacher has to be open to changes, and must be able to evaluate and accept the positive ones. The teachers develop their personalities by finding new information and processing it. The learning process is open and the teacher learns together with the students. Cooperation is one of the main principles of intercultural education. Teachers should also pay more attention to the development of the students' creativity, critical thinking, development of problem-solving skills, and development of their sense of awareness of cultural values of different nations, thus enriching their own culture.

The specifics of the tourism business requires specialists with well developed intercultural communication skills; therefore it is necessary to create a new pedagogical model for the teaching-learning of ESP for students of the tourism industry, which includes intercultural,

communicative and professional competence. This model should be based on students' previous educational backgrounds and lead them to their future profession.

The Model of ESP Competence for Tourism Specialists

In learning ESP the necessity to develop students' communicative competence coincides with the necessity to create authentic language learning contexts thus forming the students' experience (Widdowson, 1973).

An analysis of competence theories enables the researcher to create a definition of ESP competence for tourism specialists: **ESP competence** is the quality of experience gained during the learning process, which allows a specialist, observing different cultural traditions and peculiarities, to creatively implement the English language both receptively and productively in business communication, interaction, and professional work; to responsibly develop their industry and offer the client a product in an understandable and acceptable way.

Based on an analysis of theoretical literature, created definitions, and the specifics of the tourism industry a classification of ESP competence for tourism specialists has been made (see Figure No.1). All the components of ESP competence (communicative, intercultural and professional competence) are interconnected and influence each other. The components of communicative competence are all of equal importance and interact with each other. Grammatical competence is mentioned in the first position because it was included in all the studied competence classifications. Intercultural competence consists of attitudes, the declared knowledge of cultural aspects (Dirba, 2004:25), and the ability to operate in different cultural contexts. An analysis of competence and professional competence theories enabled the researcher to identify components of professional competence: cognitive competence, personal competence and technological-professional competence. The development of ESP competence takes place in

action (process) and it is based on students' experiences, and consequently students form new experiences in the process.

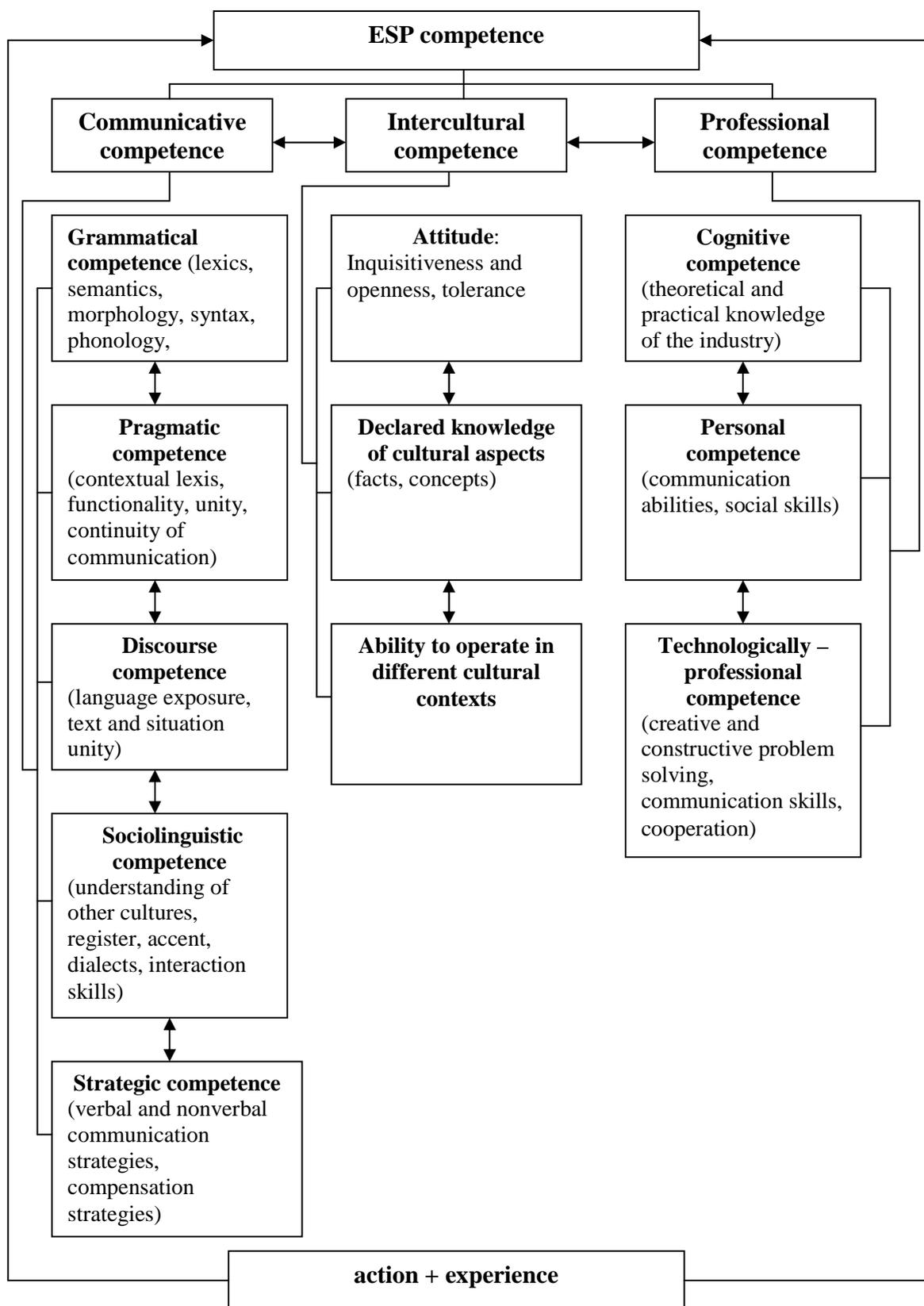
Description of the Research

Methods of the Study

The **research problem** lies in the discrepancy between students' General English language competence and the demands of the tourism business labour market, which requires creative, decisive, educated specialists with a high level of ESP competence, excellent cooperation skills and an ability to work in an international environment demonstrating a high level of intercultural competence. The **aim** of this research is to create a model of ESP competence for tourism specialists, and offer solutions for the development of students' intercultural competence in the ESP course. The **main questions of the research** are as follows:

- to study the pedagogical, psychological and linguistic literature and sources about competence theories, intercultural education and to create a model of ESP competence for tourism specialists,
- to conduct an empirical study in order to evaluate the tourism students' intercultural competence,
- to offer proposals to ESP teachers on how to promote the development of students' intercultural competence in the ESP course.

Figure 1. ESP Competence for Tourism Specialists



Stages of the Research

The research was conducted in **five stages** at the Faculty of International Tourism (FIT) of the School of Business Administration *Turība* (BAT), Latvia:

- January 2003-September 2004 – the analysis of theoretical literature and needs analysis;
- September 2004-August 2005 – the analysis of theoretical literature and creation of the model;
- September 2005-April 2006 – the analysis of theoretical literature and improvement of the model;
- May 2006-November 2006 – generalization of the research results,
- December 2006-April 2007 – evaluation of the created model.

This article presents **the third stage** of the research.

The Process of the Research and Its Results

During the **first stage** of the research (January 2003-September 2004), needs analysis was conducted. The total number of respondents consisted of 137 people (99 students, 12 lecturers and 26 tourism experts). The needs analysis was done applying both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis.

During **the second stage** of the study (September 2004-August 2005), ESP was taught according to the created ESP competence model. First, in order to define the tourism students' ESP competence, nine groups of FIT students (86 students) whose English knowledge corresponded to level B2 according to the European Language Framework system, took English for the Tourism Industry (EFTI) exam using the sample of the exam of the year 2004. As a result a target group of nine first-year students was chosen to study English according to the created model. ESP was learnt choosing teaching-learning methods and styles acceptable to both the students and the teacher. Mainly methods that stimulate language learning were chosen: role-plays, case studies, dialogues and problem solving tasks. Texts, listening tasks and writing tasks were connected with the explanation of a professional lexis, which means its consolidation into

practice. Students also did speaking tasks or activities in which a professional lexis had to be used. Students filled in self-evaluation forms and the teacher filled in students' assessment forms after each theme.

During the **third stage** of the research (September 2005-April 2006), the created model of ESP competence was improved and the criteria and their indicators for determining students' ESP competence were finalized and tested:

- Criterion: language use for professional duties – indicators: mutual oral communication, understanding of a specialized professional text, business correspondence;
- Criterion: creative professional thinking – indicators: cooperation, creativity;
- Criterion: abilities of intercultural communication – indicators: openness and understanding.

The target group consisted of nine students, whose average age was 19.3 years. For seven students English was their first foreign language, for one – the second and for one – the third foreign language. Nevertheless, at the beginning they had the same language competence level (B2). During their studies all the students lived in Riga. In the first study year, three students combined their studies with work in tourism establishments. In the second study year, all the students were doing part time jobs in tourism establishments. Four students had their summer training abroad (two in the UK and two in Greece), others – in Latvia. Five students specialized in hotels, two in restaurants and two in travel agencies. This group is typical of the FIT, where about 50% of students choose to specialize in hotels and 50% in travel agencies and restaurants, with most students starting to work in their specialty in the second year of their studies and half of the students gaining international job experience by doing their summer training abroad.

Based on the analysis of theoretical literature and sources, needs analysis and the curricula, the researcher created the descriptions of the levels for indicators of ESP competence. The criterion *abilities of intercultural communication* include:

- students' ability to implement intercultural communication and cooperation skills in practice,
- students' interest in cultural values of other nations and ability to compare them with the cultural values of their own culture,
- students' ability to understand different thinking styles and behaviour of other culture,
- students' ability to accept challenges to creatively use new possibilities, to be open to changes and to be ready to work in different cultural contexts.

A proficient user (high level of intercultural competence) is characterized by independent and creative performance, an independent user (medium level of intercultural competence) has acquired theoretical knowledge and is able to act in similar situations, and a basic user (low level of intercultural competence) needs somebody's help in performing the tasks.

Research was conducted to determine the level of students' intercultural competence. First, an analysis of the students' exam marks in subjects dealing with intercultural communication (*Communication and Hospitality in the Tourism Industry, Business Etiquette, Hotel Front Office Management, History of Latvian and Baltic Culture*) was done. Intercultural competence levels were estimated as follows: from 1 to 4 points – low level, from 5 to 7 points – medium level, and from 8 to 10 points – high level. The average mark of all the exams showed that six students had high and three students had a medium level of intercultural competence.

Second, the lecturers of the previously-mentioned subjects were interviewed. The aim was to determine the correlation between the exam marks and the teachers' observation during the studies. The interviews were analyzed by the qualitative data analysis programme AQUAD 6. The interviews justified the choice of indices for the criterion. All the lecturers stressed the importance of intercultural communication, supporting the role of languages and knowledge of psychology and theoretical knowledge of other cultures in intercultural competence. The interviewed lecturers' definitions of the three levels of intercultural competence mostly coincided with the one made by the researcher. Thus RZ stated that "a proficiency level includes theoretical knowledge about possible communication, people's inner tolerance and openness", and the independent user is a person who has "theoretical knowledge of people on how to use communication skills but people cannot implement theoretical knowledge into practice". In its turn AS defined a basic user as a person who "has low self-esteem which causes a desire not to communicate with others. The opposite is a person who is self-contented and does not care about others", which also coincides with the level for basic user.

Next, students' intercultural competence was assessed according to the description of competence levels. The researcher encountered a problem that tourism lecturers could not exactly remember all the students. To get valid results the researcher asked to assess intercultural competence of only those students' whom the lecturers remembered very well. Data analysis showed that in most situations all the lecturers had similarly assessed the level of the students' intercultural competence but some statements were marked controversially. Thus one lecturer assessed the intercultural competence of students IK and AP as high but the other lecturer assessed it as a medium one. This shows that students' intercultural competence in different subjects was exposed differently.

When comparing the exam marks, students' assessments done by the tourism teachers and the exposure of students' intercultural competence during the ESP lessons resulted in an observable discrepancy. The way in which the lecturers had assessed the students' intercultural competence differed from the exam results but coincided with the researcher's observations done during ESP lessons: four students had high, four medium, and one a low level of intercultural competence. This means that exam marks do not reveal the students' level of intercultural competence and cannot be used as the only tool for its measurement. Data analysis proved that the higher the level of students' intercultural competence, the higher the level of their language competence, and vice versa. It may be explained by the fact that students who have a high level of language competence have more possibilities to communicate with foreigners; they use language for gaining information, thus widening their viewpoint and developing tolerance and cultural awareness.

The **conclusions** from the empirical study are as follows:

- the interviews with the tourism teachers justify the choice of criterion, its indicators and level descriptions,

- students' intercultural competence in different subjects may be exposed differently, revealing different competence levels,
- the level of students' intercultural competence is closely connected with their language competence. The higher the level of students' intercultural competence, the higher their language competence level, and vice versa.

According to the chosen design of the researcher's PhD thesis, the **fourth stage** of research (May 2006-November 2006) includes the generalization of the designed ESP competence model. The researcher participated in an international scientific project dealing with the development of teachers' professional competence. The questioning of different students was conducted in Latvia and partnership countries (Germany, Spain), focus group interviews were arranged, and the collected data were processed and analyzed. The researcher was allowed to adapt the questionnaire used in the project and implement it in her research.

It is planned that the **fifth stage** of the research will last from December 2006 through April 2007 and it will include the final evaluation of the created ESP competence model.

Suggestions for ESP teachers

The ESP course is not the students' first language learning experience. Students had already developed their own learning styles and strategies in secondary school. Possibly they also made some stereotypes concerning different cultures, which now have to be dismissed.

To develop students' intercultural competence it is necessary to choose such teaching aids (or adapt the existing ones) so that they correspond to four criteria. They have to provide information about the country, its inhabitants, values and attitudes, and they have to promote students' wishes to change and accept other cultures (Kalnina, Petre, 2006).

One of the ways to develop students' intercultural competence is the *culture assimilator*. It is a programmed learning experience. Students are informed about different incidents that characterize a typical and critical interaction between two representatives from different cultures. Each incident offers several explanations (one is right, the others are wrong) for the activity of interaction partners. Students have to find a solution, which is the most typical one for the interaction partners. Other methods include an analysis of critical incidents or case studies, which may be stories, fairytales, newspaper articles, and so on, and video or audio recordings. It is advisable to think of some challenging themes, for example, a business present or a bribe? Other tasks may include problem-solving situations that reveal communication mistakes or conflicts between members of different cultures. Students may also apply decision-making strategies. Another possibility is to use role-plays and case studies, which are close to having a real context, and students can demonstrate their attitude, emotions and values while performing their role (Morgensternova, & Gillernova, 2005).

I. Kalnina and L. Petre offer several ideas about how to develop students' intercultural competence. In the ESP course for tourism students the following suggestions can be used:

- “Adapt topics and activities to suit the cultural goals of a lesson.
- Add material, either in the form of texts or exercise, if there is insufficient coverage of the topic.
- Produce a guidebook, poster or webpage for visitors to their town, country or region. This should not only describe famous sites and places to visit, stay or eat, but also give visitors advice about what they may find strange or unusual about their own culture.

- If students have visited the target country, they can recount their experiences – perhaps by giving a written or oral presentation with advice for other students” (Kalnina, Petre, 2006:101).

The researcher practiced considerable group work and pair work in order to involve all the students in an activity. During the research process students made two larger projects, which they presented at the annual students’ foreign language conference. In the first year they had to make a presentation of some Latvian hotel/restaurant for their foreign partners in order to attract them as potential clients. In the second year students had to create an itinerary for a tour and sell it to their clients. Students could choose between two options: to sell foreign clients a tour around Latvia or to sell a tour abroad to Latvian tourists thus demonstrating understanding of the needs of different cultures.

Students also made presentations about holidays, festivals and celebrations in another country, presented national cuisines of countries, informed their group mates about the most popular tourism objects and museums in other countries and planned an excursion to Old Riga for their hypothetical foreign clients. In such a way the teacher tried to make the students understand that each culture is unique. Most of all the students liked videos about different events and objects of other countries, and their cultures. The videos always were connected with doing some creative task thus developing students’ imagination and creativity.

In addition, it is possible to use audio recordings, web pages (if available), songs, texts, even grammar tasks that contain a cultural context to develop students’ intercultural competence. All that is needed is the teacher’s imagination and the wish to compose adequate tasks.

Conclusion

ESP competence consists of communicative competence (grammatical competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence), intercultural competence (attitude, declared knowledge of cultural aspects, and the ability to operate in different cultural contexts) and professional competence (cognitive competence, personal competence, and technological-professional competence). All the components interact with each other and the development of ESP competence takes place in action; it is based on the students' experience and at the same time forms new experiences in the learning process.

Intercultural competence is an integral part of ESP competence and it can be developed during ESP lessons applying the teaching-learning methods that promote students' activity and widen their point of view, teaching them to think creatively and to accept different cultures and to be open to changes.

The teachers are constantly developing together with their students, broadening their viewpoints and gaining experience and cultural knowledge.

Intercultural competence is closely connected with language competence. The higher the level of students' language competence, the higher the level of their intercultural competence is, and vice versa.

In order to assess students' ESP competence as a whole, it is necessary to create an instrument that would assess all the separate competence components in a united system. Such an instrument may be a generalization of the collected data and a focus group interview involving students, teachers and experts of the industry.

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