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## ***Enhancing intercultural teaching competencies through internationalisation of pre-service primary foreign language teachers***

As schools are getting linguistically and culturally more diverse, it is necessary to develop teachers' intercultural teaching competencies. This paper focuses on a transnational study conducted during three editions of a blended intensive programme in which 107 pre-service primary foreign language teachers from three countries participated. The goals of the programme were to engage future teachers



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in practices strengthening international and intercultural dimensions, and to broaden their knowledge and skills on language and content integration in different European contexts. The results of the study, which was conducted using different methods of data collection, including focus group interviews, surveys, analysis of lesson plans and classroom observations, showed the development of intercultural foundational competencies, i.e., strengthening of participants' self-awareness and self-reflexivity in developing their cultural and disciplinary identities. The participants also developed competencies necessary to recognise learners' needs to build effective classroom communities. Participants found it difficult to respond to diversity in the classroom by planning and implementing global and intercultural learning activities for pupils. The study shows that internationalisation is crucial for pre-service primary language teachers to improve their professional and intercultural competencies.

**Keywords:** intercultural teaching competencies, internationalisation, pre-service primary teachers, teacher education

**Słowa kluczowe:** kompetencje międzykulturowe w nauczaniu, umiędzynarodowienie kształcenia nauczycieli, nauczyciele szkół podstawowych, kształcenie nauczycieli

## 1. Introduction

The teaching of foreign languages at primary level is starting at a younger age, leading to a greater demand for teachers and a greater diversification of teacher profiles. In recent years, generalist teachers (i.e., primary school teachers who teach all subjects together with English) have been getting a more prominent role in early foreign language education (European Commission, 2023). As schools are becoming linguistically and culturally more diverse, intercultural teaching competence plays a key role in the training of future primary language teachers. Many authors point out (Kelly, Grenfell, 2004; McKeown, Kurt, 2012; Niculescu, Bazgan, 2017; Okken et al., 2022) that intercultural competence should be embedded in the competence profile of teachers, as they play one of the main roles in the development of students' intercultural competence. Huber (2012) refers to intercultural competence as a key component of education that should be reflected in primary education curricula. Curriculum designers try to follow Byram's model of intercultural communication competence, which includes knowledge of cultural components, the development of a positive attitude towards otherness, the ability to interpret and identify with other cultures, the ability to interact and think critically in other cultures, and finally, awareness of one's own culture (Byram, 1997).

The most effective way to develop intercultural teaching competencies is through internationalisation, but research indicates that there are few opportunities for students in primary education programmes, compared to other faculties of higher education. Internationalisation in teacher education is hindered by an often-observed narrow focus on the needs of local and regional education systems (Koh et al., 2022). This is unfortunate, as internationalisation in teacher education enables the integration of international, intercultural and global dimensions in the curriculum, teaching methods and organisational policies of teacher training programmes. Furthermore, it enables the establishment of international teaching relationships and the development of language skills. When student teachers encounter other student teachers abroad, they can build lifelong connections that can help them find partners for future international teaching projects. Using English as a lingua franca in international exchanges or projects also benefits student teachers' English language skills, which is particularly important if they wish to teach English as a foreign language (hereafter FL).

The most common form of internationalisation is internationalisation abroad (IA). Okken and colleagues (2022) point out that the study abroad experience during teacher education contributes to the development of student teachers' cultural awareness, and improves their understanding of diversity, which can help them to adapt to the needs of their pupils in their future profession. Shadowen and colleagues (2015) also pointed out that facing critical situations during study abroad can help students develop problem-solving skills and reflect on their own teaching philosophies and values.

Nevertheless, not all student teachers are able to study abroad for a semester for various reasons. A Blended Intensive Programme (hereafter BIP) is an international mobility programme that combines a longer virtual exchange experience with a short-term mobility in one semester, allowing students to develop their intercultural and linguistic skills during their studies at a home university with a shorter period of studying abroad. This experience might entice students to complete a long-term learning mobility in the future (cf. European Commission, 2022).

Unfortunately, not many primary education student teachers decide to study abroad. Only an average of 3.8% of pre-service primary education teachers from the universities involved in this study (University of Ljubljana, University College of Teacher Education Tyrol, University of Warsaw) took part in mobility programmes between 2019 and 2023. The number of students studying abroad across Europe is similar (Eurostat, 2023). In 2021, only 2.2% of students came from the field of education. Of the ten different fields of study presented by Eurostat (2023), education ranks second to last

among study fields for tertiary students studying abroad, with fields such as business, law and engineering dominating. Similarly, the European Commission (2023) reports that almost 30% of modern foreign language teachers surveyed in the EU have never been abroad for professional purposes and emphasizes that this can affect the quality of their teaching. Thus, any kind of mobility of education students should be encouraged, especially when primary school teachers take on the responsibility of teaching English as a FL. The Eurydice report (European Commission, 2023) states that the issue of FL competence of primary school teachers is crucial in many European countries, as it is mainly generalist teachers who teach foreign languages in primary education.

A review of the literature shows that the development of the intercultural teaching competencies of student teachers in primary education is still largely unexplored. Therefore, this paper aims to fill this gap by investigating the development of intercultural teaching competencies of pre-service primary school teachers after participating in a BIP “Integrating English into the Primary Curriculum” organised by three European universities and conducted over three consecutive years. Furthermore, it aims to examine how an international learning community can support the development of intercultural teaching competencies of students of primary education who will also teach English as a FL.

## **2. Internationalisation in teacher education**

Internationalisation is gaining a prominent role in education, mainly due to globalisation and the interdependence of the world. De Wit et al. (2015) define internationalisation in higher education as the “intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of postsecondary education in order to improve the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (p. 281). Phan, Tran, and Blackmore (2024) state that internationalisation encompasses various processes, such as international mobility, professional development, transnational research collaboration, cross-border partnerships, and internationalisation of curricula. Knight (2012) divides internationalisation into two distinct categories: internationalisation abroad (IA) and internationalisation at home (IaH). The former includes activities that take place abroad, e.g., mobility of staff, students, projects and the like, while the latter includes international activities that take place at the home institution, e.g., internationalisation of the curriculum (Knight, 2012). A third category has only recently been added,

namely internationalisation at home through online learning, which includes activities such as online exchange, virtual mobility and collaborative online international learning (COIL) (Mittelmeier et al., 2019).

Research on the internationalisation of primary school teacher education has shown many benefits. Killick (2011) found that exposure to different cultures improves teachers' ability to deal with diverse classes and promotes empathy, tolerance and respect. In addition, internationalisation can improve the quality of education by incorporating different teaching methods and philosophies, encouraging the adoption of best practices, and promoting innovation and creativity in teaching (Leask, 2015). Teachers gain international experiences and perspectives that enhance their career prospects and promote lifelong learning and professional growth (Cushner, Mahon, 2002). In addition, internationalisation facilitates global networking and creates opportunities for international partnerships, collaborative research and exchange programmes (Altbach, Knight, 2007; O'Dowd, 2023). Pająk-Ważna (2013) asserts that an interculturally competent teacher should be able to interpret, evaluate and relate to different intercultural contexts, put their frame of reference into perspective and apply behaviours and skills appropriate to specific intercultural contexts.

Despite these benefits, internationalisation is also associated with some challenges. It may require significant investment of resources, time, and administrative support, which might limit participation for some institutions (Dewey, Duff, 2009). Another disadvantage is unequal access to international opportunities, as not all institutions or individuals can participate equally, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities (Marginson, 2006). There are also implementation challenges, such as integrating international perspectives into existing curricula and overcoming resistance from staff accustomed to traditional methods (Knight, 2004). Leask and Bridge (2013) also point out the need to ensure that internationalisation is aligned with national educational standards and requirements. Language barriers pose a further challenge, as they can hinder effective communication and collaboration in an international environment (Beelen, Jones, 2015).

### **3. Intercultural teaching competencies**

Dimitrov and Haque (2016) have developed a model of intercultural teaching competencies to help teachers reflect on their teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. Their framework includes key competencies that are categorised into three main groups, i.e., foundational competencies, facilitation competencies and curriculum design competencies. As this model is the

most comprehensive and applicable to primary education, it serves as the main conceptual framework for the research presented in this paper. The foundational competencies include teachers' awareness of their own cultural and disciplinary identities and understanding of their students' cultural background, values and beliefs. This awareness is crucial, as it helps teachers understand their interactions with students, and appreciate the diverse cultural backgrounds in the classroom (Dimitrov, Haque, 2016).

The facilitation competencies encompass intercultural teaching skills that enable teachers to recognise and respond to learners' needs, communication styles and different linguistic abilities to promote an inclusive and effective learning environment. Teachers need to be able to deal with cultural misunderstandings and conflicts, and apply culturally sensitive communication strategies to ensure that all students feel valued and understood. Facilitation competencies improve the teacher-student relationship and contribute to better academic and social outcomes for students (Dimitrov, Haque, 2016).

The third category, curriculum design competencies, allows teachers to reflect on their course planning. Educators need to be flexible and innovative in their teaching approaches to meet the diverse needs of their learners, using a variety of teaching methods and materials that cater to different learning styles and cultural backgrounds, incorporating multicultural perspectives and resources into the curriculum to help students reflect on their own experiences in their education, increase their engagement and motivation, etc. Adaptive teachers can create a learning environment that is both inclusive and dynamic (Dimitrov, Haque, 2016).

#### **4. Research context**

The BIP project titled "Integrating English into the Primary Curriculum" which provided the context for this study, took place for the first time in the 2022/2023 academic year in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The second edition was held in Innsbruck, Austria, in 2023/2024, and the third edition took place in Warsaw, Poland, in 2024/2025.

The main objectives of the project were: (1) to engage pre-service primary education language teachers in practices that strengthen international and intercultural dimensions in teacher education, (2) to increase pre-service teachers' knowledge and skills in content and language integrated learning (CLIL) in early language contexts in a variety of European educational contexts, and (3) to create an international teacher education programme that focuses on CLIL in early teacher education.

The project comprised a virtual and a face-to-face component involving three European universities, namely the University of Ljubljana, the University College of Teacher Education Tyrol, and the University of Warsaw. All three universities offer students CLIL courses worth 4 ECTS (Ljubljana), 3 ECTS (Tyrol) and 6 ECTS (Warsaw). Before the start of the programme, most students had attended these courses at their home universities.

During the virtual part of the programme, which lasted three months, students in international groups engaged in a virtual exchange to expand their knowledge of CLIL and different forms of its implementation, focusing on lesson planning and the development of materials. At the end of this phase, they created four lesson plans for Grades 1-4. Following the virtual exchange, participants met for a week-long mobility where they implemented their lesson plans in primary schools, received feedback from peers and teachers, and participated in cross-cultural presentations to enhance international collaboration and intercultural communication.

## **5. Research methodology**

The overarching aim of the study was to explore the students' intercultural teaching competencies, using Dimitrov and Haque's (2016) model. The research questions guiding the study were: (1) In what ways did the participants develop their foundational competencies, especially their cultural and disciplinary identities? (2) In what ways did the participants develop their facilitation competencies, especially their skills of teaching diverse audiences? (3) In what ways did the participants develop their curriculum design competencies, in particular with respect to learning activities that allow students to explore cultural differences?

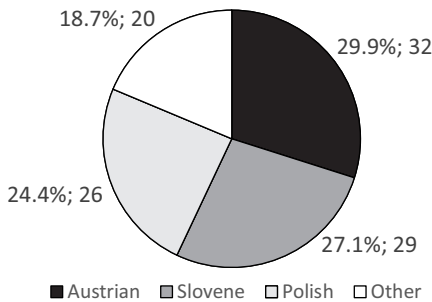
### **5.1. Research participants**

The study participants were three cohorts of pre-service primary school teachers, who will teach all subjects of the primary curriculum, including English as a FL. During their studies, the focus is on acquiring teaching skills across all curriculum areas. Most participants were Year 3 and 4 students. The participants came from the three universities mentioned above. A total of 107 students participated in the programme in 2022/2023, 2023/2024 and 2024/2025. Of these, 9 participants were male (8.4%) and 98 were female (91.6%). The groups were made up of individuals of different nationalities: 32 Austrians, 29 Slovenes, 26 Poles, 4 Germans, 4 Italians, 2 Kurds, 2

Indonesians, 2 Chinese, 1 Kyrgyz, 1 Turk, 1 Algerian, 1 Filipino, 1 Uzbek and 1 Ugandan. The students worked together in international groups of 3-4 members. The age of participants ranged from 21 to 26 years. The number and the nationality of the participants in the three editions of the programme are shown in Table 1 and Figure 1.

**Table 1. Number of the study participants in three editions of the programme (own study)**

Year	University of Warsaw	University of Ljubljana	University College of Teacher Education Tyrol	Total
2022/2023	11	7	5	23
2023/2024	12	9	22	43
2024/2025	15	13	13	41
Total	38	29	40	107



**Figure 1. Nationality of the study participants (own study)**

**5.2. Research instruments**

The study used a mixed methodology approach and drew on multiple data sources. These included programme evaluation surveys after each programme edition, CLIL lesson plans and feedback comments provided by the teacher educators and student teachers, as well as classroom performance assessments completed by the teacher educators and student teachers who observed the lessons. The evaluation survey consisted of 22 questions, of which 7 were closed-ended and 15 were open-ended.

The survey asked about the participants’ perceptions of their intercultural teaching competence development, i.e., awareness of their cultural and disciplinary identities and their ability to implement them in the classroom. The interview data consisted of six focus group interviews conducted



by researchers from each participating country (Slovenia, Austria and Poland). The interviews were semi-structured, conducted in the national languages, or in English, depending on the language background of the interviewees. The interviews were transcribed and coded according to a developed framework. In addition, the researchers analysed 82 CLIL lesson plans and the provided feedback, as well as the participants' reflections on their teaching performances. Data collection took place during the three editions of the programme in the winter semesters of 2022/2023, 2023/2024, and 2024/2025, whereas the focus group interviews took place in the summer semester of 2023/2024. The exact research procedures implemented for each edition of the programme are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Research instruments (own study)**

	Programme evaluation surveys	Focus group interviews	Peer/teacher lesson performance evaluation	Post lesson performance self-reflections	CLIL lesson plans and peer/teacher feedback
Year 2022/2023	✓	✓	✓	X	✓
Year 2023/2024	✓	✓	✓	X	✓
Year 2024/2025	✓	X	✓	✓	✓

### 5.3. Data analysis

The surveys were processed and interpreted at the level of descriptive quantitative analysis. As part of the qualitative data analysis, a deductive thematic analysis was carried out according to the model of Haque and Dimitrov (2016). The use of the framework method (Gale et al., 2013) was helpful in creating a structure, due to the number of researchers involved and the variety of data sources collected over a three-year period. Initially, all researchers approached the different data sources individually to identify and code the dimensions of the framework addressed in the data, while in subsequent steps, the researchers compared their findings using the agreed framework and finalised the analysis.

## 6. Research results

The following section presents the results of the study based on the research questions. The questions are discussed in terms of the themes that emerged

in the qualitative data collected and which were underpinned by the quantitative data.

### **6.1. Research question 1: In what ways did the participants develop their foundational competencies, especially their cultural and disciplinary identities?**

#### **6.1.1. Developing awareness of their own cultural and disciplinary identities as primary teachers taking on the responsibility of early language teaching**

Most participants, except for a small group of students in an International MA programme, stated that they rarely work in international groups. Only 7% of all participants had had experience with mobility programmes prior to this one. After participating in the programme, more than half of the participants (54%) said that they would be more willing to do a longer (Erasmus) exchange. The opportunity to discuss the teaching profession from different perspectives was seen to be beneficial, as they felt that primary education students had fewer opportunities for internationalisation compared to students from other faculties. Most of the participants (83.7%) rated the quality of working in international groups as very good (45.9%) or excellent (37.8%). This is also reflected in a comment from a participant in the programme evaluation survey: “I really liked working in the international group as everyone had different strengths and weaknesses with which we could compensate and complete each other and got to know different approaches and ideas from different countries.” Another student commented in her self-reflection after the lesson: “Collaborating with an international team broadened my perspective on how to incorporate intercultural elements into lesson planning and teaching” and another observed: “I have learnt that international teamwork isn’t always easy, but it’s incredibly enriching.”

The BIP experience enabled the participants to begin the process of reflecting on their own cultural, linguistic and disciplinary identities, and how these influenced the way they worked together to learn more about teaching English and their CLIL approach in the early primary contexts. In the programme evaluations, nearly 90% of participants rated the cultural information they had gained as the highlight of the programme. In the country presentations, students often provided geographical, cultural and linguistic background information about their national contexts. Many of them presented their own native languages and stated that languages are an important feature of their home culture. One of the interviewed participants highly

appreciated being able to present his own language, Kurdish, which he associated with the opportunity to better express his personality, even though the focus of the programme was on teaching English. One participant observed: "I know that we all are becoming English language teachers but through teaching our own languages, we were able to show our mindsets. This allowed us to show things beyond the CLIL lessons. We were happy to show our identity, our mindsets, but also our own languages." (Focus group interview, Warsaw).

When asked about their experience of learning English in the preliminary survey, all participants indicated that they considered English to be a foreign or an additional language. Most of them have learned several languages, while around 20% of students grew up in a multilingual environment and speak, or have been exposed to, several languages such as Arabic, Turkish, French, Italian or German. Despite these extensive language learning experiences, English language proficiency appeared to be a controversial topic in the student teachers' reflections and evaluations of their BIP experiences. While some student teachers felt confident about their language skills, others were concerned about communicating in English with their peers. In the programme evaluation of two consecutive cohorts of students, some participants shared their views about the apparent low language proficiency of other group members, and indicated that their own language skills were superior to those of other group members. On the other hand, a group of student teachers indicated that they felt anxious about speaking English to their colleagues prior to their BIP experience and they observed the development of their English language communication skills through the BIP experience. As one participant stated:

"I started to participate more in the conversation in the tutorials or lectures when nobody answered the professor, in the past I was also silent, but after that [BIP] I was more cooperative during the lessons." (Focus group interview, Ljubljana).

In addition, the study revealed that some of the student teachers reported having acquired some language learning strategies that they associated with acquiring useful skills when taking on the new task of working with young learners. In the following extract, a participant from Poland concludes:

"We spent much time comparing languages and words, especially between Polish and Slovenian. I figured out that when they [the Slovenian students] speak slower, and when I am familiar with the context, I can understand a lot in Slovenian." (Focus group interview, Warsaw).

The following comment gives an insight into the connection she has made between her language learning experience and language teaching:

“We were told in our language teaching class that context is important. But I could experience it when I wanted to learn something in a language I did not know very well. So, when we teach children, we really need to support them in understanding the context. They do not need to understand every word to comprehend a text.” (Focus group interview, Warsaw).

On many occasions, the student teachers reflected on how their own language development could enhance their ability to teach children, while a lower language level could prevent them from providing good language teaching to their pupils. As one student said: “It was just this fear that I wouldn’t be able to help children if they didn’t understand me.” (Focus group interview, Innsbruck). And another noted:

“For me it was teaching in English, not the idea that I had to teach in English, but that the children would not understand me, and I didn’t know what I would do in that case. When I came to the class, I saw that everybody understood, mostly, and that it was possible to communicate in English.” (Focus group interview, Ljubljana).

### **6.1.2. Developing awareness of how contrasting disciplinary approaches impact their teaching and learning**

The study showed that the participants began to think critically about their own education system and their role as primary school teachers. They discussed the individualisation and personalisation of their teaching as they noted that some teachers had more freedom and flexibility in deciding how to incorporate English into the curriculum and how to design lessons. One of the students observed in the programme evaluation survey: “I liked and loved the spirit of diversity, inclusion and interculturality at the school, but I am not sure if it is possible to include it into our school system. Observing other schools allowed me to reconsider the strengths and weaknesses of our system and think about my future role as a teacher.” Throughout the programme there were many instances where participants referred to their own experiences as learners and teachers, for example, one student noted: “Otherwise I have found that the mindset and approaches [of the observed teachers] were basically the same or similar as in Slovenia because also our teachers and school system is evolving”. Another student concluded: “I can teach in a different way [than the

teachers I observed] and still be efficient.” (Post lesson performance self-reflection).

The study also showed that throughout the BIP, student teachers began to view their own role in teaching in English as integrating different curriculum areas into English language teaching. They often emphasised that they did not consider themselves as English language teaching specialists, unsure how they could contribute to their pupils’ language learning. While some of them welcomed the idea that they could deliver meaningful instruction through integrating more primary content, others had doubts about whether they could meet the expectations of the primary curriculum and English language teaching. One of the student teachers from Slovenia pointed out that she appreciated the opportunities offered by the CLIL approach, which she also expressed in the focus group interviews: “I found the CLIL approach very interesting, especially because you can make cross-curricular links and you can make it easier for your students to learn, especially if you are a primary teacher. I like the emphasis on giving information in different ways.” (Focus group interview, Ljubljana).

However, many students were unsure whether they should take responsibility for teaching content and language. They spoke about the perceived demands and the feeling of being restricted by national curricula. They expressed their concerns about meeting expectations, or what is traditionally done in primary school classrooms, such as:

“I find the CLIL approach difficult and cannot understand the purpose and what I should focus on during the lessons. Am I supposed to be an English teacher or an early education teacher? How can I combine these two roles when my pupils do not know so much English, but I have to teach them certain things. How can they learn if they do not understand me?” (Focus group interview, Warsaw).

## **6.2. Research question 2: In what ways did the participants develop their facilitation competencies, especially their teaching skills of diverse audiences?**

### **6.2.1. Experiencing working in intercultural groups and teaching in diverse classrooms**

When asked to what extent they thought they had developed their intercultural skills during the programme, more than half of the participants (62.1%) stated that they had developed them significantly, with 48.6% indi-

cating that they had developed these skills very much and 13.5% to a great extent. This is also reflected in some of the participants' comments in the programme evaluation: "It definitely had a big impact on my development of intercultural skills through communication and learning about each other's teaching methods." Another noticed:

"I think getting to work with student teachers presented a great opportunity to develop intercultural skills through first-hand experience. I got to observe different approaches and later communicate with the people I noticed them from. It was helpful to see other people's activities, how they start their lesson planning, and how they interpret the lesson topics."

While the evaluation data confirmed that 81% of student teachers highly valued the opportunity to plan and teach CLIL lessons in international groups (27% of participants rated this as a 5 and 54% rated it as a 4 on a rating scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent)), the focus group interviews as well as the observation data showed that participants struggled to adapt to different needs of their colleagues and their pupils. Despite the frequently shared sense of mutual support and understanding, the participants slowly noticed some diversity among themselves and in their approach to teaching. The differences became even more apparent in the second part of the programme as the student teachers worked more closely together and felt under pressure to deliver lessons in the schools. On many occasions, they noticed how the differences affected their work both inside and outside the classroom. They were not always clear about how to resolve the conflicts that arose or negotiate the differences in an atmosphere of safety and trust. In fact, the data revealed numerous examples of student teachers' unwillingness to resolve differences while working on various teaching tasks. The conflicts concerned the preparation of teaching materials, giving feedback to young learners or meeting deadlines. When asked about the reasons for the disagreements, many of the initial responses were judgemental and emotional, and little attempt was made to observe and better understand their colleagues' decisions. One student commented: "I was especially bothered by the lack of cooperation [of other student teachers in the group]. Why should I ask them to do their work? – that was a big problem. We had set deadlines for submission, and they didn't meet them." (Programme evaluation survey).

In many cases, the student teachers chose not to provide further explanation, although discussion of the different opinions could lead to some useful conclusions about CLIL teaching. One of the student teachers noted that she took a very different approach to teaching art than her Austrian colleagues. She saw her role as creating opportunities for meaningful

communication between learners, rather than focusing on the art curriculum. Unfortunately, the student chose not to engage with the difference of opinion, instead choosing not to present her perspective:

“We had different views on how much attention should be put into the lesson. I did not care so much about the art and for me it was more about communication which was more important. She [a student from Austria] was mad at me for talking to children about art. For me teaching about art was secondary, I cared about communicating with my pupils”. (Focus group interview, Warsaw).

It was evident that the participants experienced communication barriers caused by factors beyond the use of appropriate grammatical structures or vocabulary. In some cases, they were able to recognise these and move on, but in many cases, they were unable to overcome them. One student teacher summarised this experience:

“We didn’t really get along because we had different perspectives on the teaching itself. We ‘bumped’ into each other, we had to get over it, talk it through, point out what was important to whom, so that we could then make a lesson that everybody liked.” (Focus group interview, Ljubljana).

While they struggled with communicating with each other, they also thought about how to plan their CLIL lessons with young learners to facilitate communication in different classrooms. This was a major challenge for them, as they were concerned about their young learners’ poor language skills and the more cognitively demanding content they were expected to teach. The additional obstacle of teaching children with whom they did not share the same native language was a first for many. One participant observed:

“We were struggling to teach young children some concepts about different musical instruments. It was very difficult for us because we did not share the same language as our pupils. So, we had to teach our pupils facts about string instruments without speaking the same language. This was difficult.” (Post lesson performance self-reflection).

The lesson plans and feedback from teachers showed that participants faced challenges in supporting pupils’ communication and understanding when delivering CLIL lessons. Students did not consider the variety of support they could offer to pupils with limited English proficiency, when planning. The most common barriers related to lack of planning of classroom language, differentiation, contextualisation, and lack of language scaffolding.

Only 19 out of 82 lesson plans had more detailed descriptions of the classroom language, with examples of simplified teacher talk. In many comments (47 out of 82), teacher educators indicated limited contextualisation where language was supported by visual aids to explain various topics (diagrams, pictures, or charts). Many feedback comments encouraged students to use more hands-on activities, such as experiments or different forms of demonstration, which would be particularly helpful for pupils with lower language skills. Students also missed opportunities for language scaffolding in lessons, e.g., when young learners were asked to describe the solar system or discuss it in groups. With appropriate vocabulary and structures provided by scaffolding techniques, this activity would have been carried out more effectively.

### **6.3. Research question 3: In what ways did the participants develop their curriculum design competencies, in particular with respect to learning activities that allow students to explore cultural differences?**

#### **6.3.1. Implementing learning activities related to cultural differences**

The teacher educators who participated in the programme guided the student teachers to use activities that encourage pupils to think about intercultural differences, and to look at the topic from a perspective other than their own, when creating their lesson plans. It was interesting to observe that the student groups, made up of student teachers from different cultures, had difficulty reflecting their cultural diversity in their lesson planning. Only a few groups (4 out of 82 lesson plans) planned activities that allowed for comparison of the different cultures. These activities included exploring fruits, trees, dances and inventions in different randomly selected countries. Only six groups (7 out of 82 lesson plans) chose to incorporate their own cultural diversity in their lesson plans, through activities designed to encourage pupils to practise perspective taking. These groups asked pupils to compare the characteristics of winter, the countryside, seaside and sea animals, different types of food, Christmas decorations, and traditions in the student teachers' and pupils' countries in seven different lesson plans. Although the students brought materials that represented their own cultural background, they did not discuss the meaning of these materials in depth with the pupils, partly out of concern for the pupils' low language level, and because they did not speak the same first language.

The researchers also found that students perceived intercultural teaching differently. While some of them understood intercultural learning as



learning about traditions and customs, which is very common in FL classes, others wanted to present intercultural topics in a deeper way, which sometimes became an issue they discussed in their groups. In one group they discussed how intercultural teaching could be integrated into the curriculum:

“We have realised at a certain point that when we plan teaching, we do not agree what teaching culture is. Speaking about the snowman or showing some celebrations is not talking about culture. We need to include more context and show how and why people do certain things in a certain culture.” (Focus group interview, Warsaw).

## 7. Discussion

This paper has explored the development of the intercultural teaching competencies of pre-service primary foreign language teachers participating in the Blended Intensive Programme “Integrating English into Primary Curriculum”. The results of the study indicate that the students who were part of the programme developed their intercultural teaching competencies only to a certain extent. The areas in which participants made the most progress were the foundational competencies, including their cultural and disciplinary identities, while facilitation competencies were only partially developed. The least progress was seen in developing curriculum design competencies.

The development of foundational competencies that form the backbone of intercultural competencies has been demonstrated in a variety of data sources. The researchers noticed that students became more attentive and aware of different cultures, languages and their disciplinary identities as primary teachers of a foreign language. The participants valued their involvement in the international programme, as they lack opportunities for intercultural exchange as learners and as teachers working in an intercultural context.

The programme offered students the opportunity to reflect on their own culture, including the school culture and educational system, as well as their role as primary school teachers. They began to recognise the similarities and differences in school systems, foreign language education, teaching approaches and teaching philosophies. As Smolcic (2011) points out, teacher training for diverse classrooms requires not only knowledge of other cultures, but also a critical analysis of one’s own culture. This involves not only reflecting on one’s own culture in relation to other cultures, but also establishing a relationship between one’s own culture and other cultures (Byram, 1997). Skopinskaja (2003) argues that by observing and analysing

different cultures, including their own, students become “less ethnocentric, and more culturally relativist” (p. 54), which is an essential characteristic of primary school teachers working with young students.

We should not overlook an important aspect of the development of the intercultural teaching competencies of pre-service primary education teachers, i.e., the development of their language skills, as they will be teaching English as a FL alongside all other subjects. Their involvement in international programmes is crucial, as it allows them to develop not only their cultural identity but also their disciplinary identity as language teachers for young learners. The participants valued this experience and reported higher levels of confidence when interacting in FL with their peers, during their regular lessons at the university after completing the programme, and consequently with pupils in the classroom. Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2011) argue that teachers who teach young learners need not only have content and methodological knowledge but also need to be proficient in their pupils’ L1 and L2. The ELLiE study, similarly, found that early primary FL teachers need a high level of fluency (Enever, 2011). The FL skills of student teachers can also be improved through internationalisation, as many studies have shown (Foster, 2009; Klapper, Rees, 2012; Llanes, Munoz, 2009, to name a few).

The results of the study also showed that the participants struggled with their disciplinary identity as CLIL teachers. Firstly, they had to negotiate their perceptions of CLIL within their international groups. While they had all received instruction in CLIL methodology during their studies at their home university prior to the programme, their views on how to implement CLIL were very different. This is not unusual, as many researchers have pointed out the variety of CLIL models and practices in different educational contexts (e.g., Coyle, Hood, Marsh, 2010; European Commission, 2006; Ruiz de Zarobe, Jiménez Catalán, 2009). In addition, the study participants were unsure how to adapt the language for young learners and keep the content of the subject they were teaching at an appropriate level. They encountered issues with classroom language use and language scaffolding in their lesson planning. The results of our study confirm the findings of Rutgers et al. (2020) who stated that teachers need to be supported in their knowledge of the language requirements in CLIL lessons and that a particular focus should be placed on integrated knowledge of language.

The category of intercultural competencies that was developed least among the study participants was curriculum design competencies. The researchers observed that although students appreciated the intercultural topics in their own learning, they were hesitant to incorporate these topics into their own teaching. Few of the lesson plans analysed contained intercultural

topics or topics that included the student teachers' own culture. This was even more surprising as the participants themselves were representatives of 14 different nationalities, and consequently, interculturality and multilingualism were an integral part of their communication and personal as well as disciplinary identities. Similar results were found in other studies (Dagarin Fojkar, Grahut, Skubic, 2022; Rokita-Jaśkow, Król-Gierat, 2021).

## 8. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to investigate the development of the intercultural teaching competencies by three cohorts of pre-service primary school language teachers who participated in three editions of the BIP, which focused on the integration of English into the primary curriculum. During the programme, they worked together in international teams that collaborated both virtually and during a week-long mobility. The analysis, supported by Dimitrov and Haque's (2016) framework, was to identify which dimensions of intercultural teaching competencies were strengthened during this experience. The framework also became a much-needed reflection tool for the teacher educators themselves to better design and deliver international learning community programmes for the development of intercultural teaching competencies.

Above all, the study showed the development of foundational intercultural teaching competencies, which were reflected in the students' reflections on different cultures, languages and their disciplinary identities as primary school teachers of a foreign language. In terms of developing facilitation competencies, participants were challenged by the need to interact with both their colleagues and pupils in a way that respects cultural and linguistic diversity. However, this led to many misunderstandings, as students did not always seem to be prepared to respond to diversity and potential conflicts, nor did they have the necessary strategies to manage such conflicts, so these often remained unresolved. This did not bode well for their future teaching practice, as the student teachers were not prepared to model and encourage behaviour that demonstrated tolerance for a variety of communication styles, differing perspectives and perceptions. In terms of curriculum design competencies, the data showed that the student teachers had limited engagement of pupils in the intercultural learning activities in primary schools, even though the students themselves worked in international groups.

In terms of the limitations of the programme, the results of the study have shown that there are potential areas for change in its design, particularly

in terms of facilitation and curriculum design competencies. Due to the short duration of the mobility and limited access to primary schools and classrooms during the exchange (only 1 to 3 days in schools), student teachers had less opportunity to gain hands-on experience with pupils in a specific educational context. Although the duration of the mobility cannot be significantly extended, the facilitation competencies could be better addressed by increasing the presence of school-based mentors, who would provide more contextualised tasks and guide students in meeting the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse pupils. Another area that should be refined in the design of the programme is supporting student teachers in developing activities and utilising a variety of resources to engage young learners in intercultural learning.

The main rationale for this project was to develop the skills of future primary teachers who will take on the responsibility to teach, not only the primary curriculum, but also a foreign language. Our aim was also to build their confidence in working in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Many students indicated that they would consider other international exchange opportunities after participating in the programme. We anticipate that later, when they are working in schools, they will be more willing to create international exchange opportunities for their own pupils in primary schools as well. We strongly believe that future primary education teachers should be given more encouragement to participate in mobility programmes, as this can promote the internationalisation of primary education. The younger the children are when they enter an intercultural and international environment, the more likely they are to continue to express their interest in other cultures.

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