

The cross-cultural business communication project

or exploiting ICT to facilitate ICC

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Abstract

The paper relates the experience gathered in the area of intercultural awareness raising with respect to methods and approaches used in the classroom and in terms of students' response. The developments related were an integral part of an EU - Leonardo da Vinci Programme sponsored project in which learning of Business English has been carried out through an integrated skills approach in a series of virtual workshops. Within the CCBC project the teacher had to assume the role of a facilitator helping students to deal with cross-cultural issues while carrying out a simulated transaction in English. Virtual environment formed the backdrop for an international network of simulated companies, thus motivating the exchange of business messages and intercultural encounters. In the academic year 2003/04 almost 500 students, 18 teachers, 16 institutions from 10 different countries participated in the CCBC network.

In the first part, the article provides information on our approaches to intercultural issues, how the topic was tackled at earlier stages of the project and what lessons have been drawn from those attempts to teach ICC (Intercultural Communication Competence). The second part gives an account of improvements introduced at later stages of the project, listing specific tasks, approaches and teaching materials developed to facilitate certain aspects of ICC in an era of the Internet. The third part is concerned mainly with results of students' work and their perception of own identity. Students benefit from the project since it gives them the opportunity to establish contacts with a number of peer groups from different countries and learn about different cultural communication patterns and possible misunderstandings.

Keywords: Business English, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), teaching / learning approaches, raising intercultural awareness, developing understanding, respect, empathy, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) based international network

1. LEARNING APPROACHES

1. *Facilitating acquisition of intercultural communication competence (ICC) in English within a simulation of business environment supported by information and communications technology (ICT)*

Present day business environment sets a new range of requirements on our teaching of Business English, thus the "communicative approach" concept, whereby the main aim of classroom activities is to use language for social interaction with other people so as to achieve communicative competence, needs to be reconsidered in view of demands created by the globalised market and the use of English as an international language.

Talking about these new requirements within foreign language teaching (FLT) Michael Byram suggests that:

FLT is therefore concerned with communication but this has to be understood as more than the exchange of information and sending of messages, which has dominated 'communicative language teaching' in recent years. Even the exchange of information is dependent upon understanding how what one says or writes will be perceived and interpreted in another cultural context; it depends on the ability to decentre and take up the perspective of the listener or reader. But successful 'communication' is not judged solely in terms of the efficiency of information exchange. It is focused on establishing and maintaining relationships. (Michael Byram, 1997: 3)

The goal is even more difficult to reach when students learn English in order to interact with other non-native speakers, using this international language as a medium to communicate across cultural boundaries. This aspect is raised by Sandra Lee McKay (2002) claiming that:

... more and more users of English as an international language (EIL) will be bilingual speakers of English who use English for a variety of specific purposes, often for cross-cultural communication. Some of these bilingual speakers will use it on daily basis within their own country, at times for cross-cultural communication within their own borders. Others will have more restricted purposes in using English, often for accessing and sharing information. Given the great diversity of users of EIL, it is imperative we examine what goals and approaches in English language teaching (ELT) are appropriate for these various kinds of EIL users. (Sandra Lee McKay, 2002: 1)

Consciousness of these new demands has been guiding work on the CCBC project from the very beginning. As teachers of English as a foreign language, bilingual but mostly non-native speakers of English, the partners in the project felt confident that a number of cultural insights could be included in our lessons of English and shared with students. After all, as a group of people from different cultural backgrounds communicating in English, we were living proof that successful cross-cultural communication was possible, since we managed to establish strong relationships and maintain them successfully enough to set up an international project. Furthermore, we were all well aware of the salient issues, could tell a number of anecdotes with intercultural background and could thus build on our own experience accumulated in different intercultural contacts and various cultural contexts.

2. Development of the ICC strand within CCBC

In order to enhance the intercultural element and give students the possibility of learning from first hand experience, we set up an ICT supported network allowing students to exchange messages directly via the Internet and post them on the CCBC website. The CCBC teaching module leads students through a series of moves such as introductions, presentations, setting up of a virtual company, advertising their products on the CCBC website, and a business transaction carried out in a chain of letter exchanges with the international partners. Progress through these moves is reflected on the CCBC webpage. Groups linked into transaction chains need to work on simultaneously in spite of the fact that they live and study miles apart. In order to achieve this the whole international network is split in smaller groups of three to six partners, progressing through the steps envisaged by the CCBC teaching module on parallel tracks, but linked in the virtual space by web postings, exchange of email messages and discussions on the CCBC Forum.

When setting up the international network of students' virtual companies we believed that the primary linguistic and cultural imprint would surface in this virtual intercultural environment and lead to misunderstandings productive to a process learning approach.

The initial assumption was that four types of communication problems could be observed and elaborated in such a virtual setup, namely:

- language errors,
- wordings which reflect vocabulary preferences of L1,
- the structure of messages which would draw on L1 practices,
- politeness strategies,

and that mismatch of assumed meanings would lead to misunderstandings that would help students learn about communication blunders from first hand experience.

It was agreed from the start that teachers would not correct any mistakes in the exchanged messages, though students were instructed to use the spell-checking tools on their computers. It was expected that such practice would reveal which mistakes can cause misunderstandings leading naturally to discussions of related grammar, vocabulary, discourse patterns and ICC topics. Thus the core elements of the CCBC teaching module would be developed organically, building on our observations of students' reactions.

In order to further enhance students' understanding of culture-specific behavior patterns within business communities around the world, we devised a Do's and Don'ts Questionnaire, based on aspects of business etiquette that seemed most important to all the partners in the project. The Questionnaire was to be used as an introspective tool, helping students to gather a number of important insights about themselves and their own culture, namely:

- to raise consciousness of culture-specific behaviour patterns,
- to promote self-knowledge,
- to help learn about business etiquette in own environment,
- to observe some simple translation strategies and pitfalls of word-for-word translation.

Information gathered with this questionnaire in the various cultural environments was to be compared and discussed in the classroom. At this stage it was assumed that a large variety of culture specific features could be deduced from a random list of behavioural norms forming the core business etiquette in the different cultural environments.

2. Initial results

The CCBC international network was an instant success and students enjoyed working and learning in this simulated business environment much more than studying from a course book. Their writing skills improved rapidly, since the aim of the messages and the audience were easier to identify. This enthusiasm may have been the reason that no obvious misunderstandings were registered, triggered solely by grammar or vocabulary mistakes.

Sentences like "We hop on getting a replay from you soon," would pass unobserved by the recipients, and the wide gap between vocabulary choices in students' messages and the model letters used in textbooks did not seem to cause any problems. The collaborative element seemed to have prevailed among peer groups round the globe.

A simple word count comparing the most frequently used words in model English business letters to those used in letters produced by Slovene students showed considerable differences as is shown in the table below.

ENQUIRIES		ORDERS		ADJUSTMENTS	
<i>Model letters</i>	<i>Students' letters</i>	<i>Model letters</i>	<i>Students' letters</i>	<i>Model letters</i>	<i>Students' letters</i>
the	we	the	we	the	we
to	to	order	order	you	the
would	would	please	would	that	our
have	are	my	offer	have	have*
will	that	have	about	thank	order
send	like	change	are/be	error	would
information	business	may	number	sorry	complaint
discount	company	each	discount	apology*	letter
enclose*	forward	ship*	interest*	please	service
like	hope	deliver*	catalogue	hope*	but

Table 1: Comparison of word-count results (words marked with an asterisk indicate that derived forms have been taken into account as well)

Table 1 shows results obtained from a small corpus of letters produced by 150 students. The corpus consists of three types of letters, enquiries, orders and adjustments each of 5000 words and an

equally large corpus of model letters.

The first line in Table 1 shows that Slovene students tend to use the active form instead of the more usual passive one, an obvious transfer from their mother tongue, hence the high incidence of the personal pronoun "we" (486 times) in all types of letters. By the same token, we can also assume that students have difficulties adapting to more formal register requirements.

The following examples, taken from students' letters, illustrate this point:

Thank you for your catalogue and price list. We have chosen: Article 15, Code no 235.

In your offer we have not found any information about conditions of payment.

Another typical trait of students' letters is displayed in the relatively few occurrences of modal verbs. Among the ten most frequently used words in model letters a variety of modal verbs show up: "would" (91 occurrences), "will" (52 occurrences), "may" (33 occurrences), "have" (31 occurrences) (used as modal), with "could" (22 occurrences) and "can" (18 occurrences) following closely. Students used "would" (182 occurrences) almost exclusively, but mainly in the phrase "we would like" (89 occurrences out of a 100 examples examined – every second occurrence was checked) and tended to overlook the nuances of politeness offered by modals in English. A comparison of use of the modal verb "would" in letters written by students and the model letters is quite revealing:

<p>... Palm, M 505, article number: 7003. We would like to order 5 items for ...</p> <p>... on purchase of 700 Euro or more. We would also like to know the place of...</p> <p>... is slightly a problem for us. We would also like to discuss about further ...</p> <p>... still possible in your company. We would like to open our branch office as ...</p> <p>... We found it quite interesting. We would like to make a reservation in the ...</p> <p>... reservation in the hotel Antika and we would also appreciate some additional...</p> <p>... of international law. Further more we would like to inform you that we are ...</p>

Students' production

<p>... complete your order or whether you would prefer to make other arrangements...</p> <p>... inconvenience it has caused you. Please would you return the whole consign ... We have the garments in stock and it would be no trouble to send them with ...</p> <p>...an tomorrow to see what we can do. It would be helpful if you could have yo ...</p> <p>...materials and work involved. If I may, I would like to suggest that you instruc ...</p> <p>...were not sure until today whether we would be able to attend. We hope you ...</p> <p>...Naturally, should it happen again, we would appreciate another report. Let's ...</p>

Model letters

Students' lexical choices also show a preference for less specialised terms and general words such as *"business"*, *"company"*, *"letter"*, *"service"* as opposed to *"enclose/ure"*, *"ship/ment"*, *"deliver/y"*, frequent in model letters, as well as a much more restricted specialist vocabulary with frequent repetitions of the same term. However, a detailed account of these differences would exceed the aim of this article.

These results led us to adapt our teaching materials and linguistic input more precisely to students' needs, so that the salient characteristics of business letters in English were stressed.

However, the question that naturally occurred to all of us was: Does linguistic accuracy really matter when English is used as a *"lingua franca"*? Our observations would certainly seem to indicate otherwise, although it has to be stressed that all students showed a high level of enthusiasm and cooperation.

It also has to be admitted that some of the teachers felt uncomfortable with the generally agreed rule that students' messages should be sent non-revised. They claimed that letters needed to be corrected and improved before being posted on the net, if we were to promote the accuracy required in the business world. In some environments the fact that the teacher did not point out every single mistake before the message was sent out was considered as negligence on the part of the teacher. As a result quite a few posted letters would not show any culture-specific traits.

A few problems were observed only with respect to granting reductions and when dealing with complaints. For instance, Italian students insisted on being granted a reduction, where the Swiss students categorically refused to grant any. Apparently, culturally tinged expectations could underlie such business decisions, but the Italian students felt frustrated. The perfect, highly formal messages arriving from their Swiss counterparts were perceived as rude.

Similarly, a complaint received from Switzerland by the Slovene students triggered animosity. The complaint was very formal, building mainly on passive constructions, in other words, a textbook example of a letter of complaint. A small-scale research was carried out in this respect and we discovered that, contrary to the advice found in English textbooks on commercial correspondence, the Slovenes would always start a letter of complaint by expressing regrets for the *"embarrassing"* situation that leads to expressing a complaint. Furthermore, frequent usage of passive constructions was perceived as creating distance between the *"business partners"*, as a refusal or reluctance to cooperate in sorting out the problem, since this grammatical device is not often used in Slovene.

Colleagues from Estonia and India reported that their students were reluctant to complain and would find all possible strategies to avoid this step in the transaction. Mostly they would just conclude the transaction with a letter thanking their partners for cooperation. Apparently such behaviour corresponds to practices in their own environments.

When learning about business etiquette, students were asked to translate the Do's and Don'ts Questionnaire into their mother tongue and to use it as a research tool in their domestic environment. Again a number of interesting points were raised, such as meaningful translation of culture-specific concepts, the concept of company culture and similar. However, a comparison of collected information showed that the Questionnaire was not sensitive enough to indicate any relevant differences between cultures and would, actually, promote stereotyping practices instead of eliminating them.

Furthermore, our students' yearly assessments of these practices kept indicating that they did not become more interested in their peers' cultures as a consequence of these classroom activities. We, therefore, agreed that something more engaging had to be included in the CCBC teaching module. The above practices were assessed as based too much on information gathering and thus often leading to stereotyping instead of developing empathy. Interestingly enough, we had to admit that virtual space on its own seemed to be without any cultural references and generated no need to place *"business partners"* in a real world, in their natural cultural environments.

3. Further developments & improvements

New developments within the CCBC project led us to consider writing tailor-made teaching materials and complementary teaching tools. Thus a Student's Book was produced with two units dedicated almost

entirely to acquiring intercultural insights and promoting introspective approaches to cultural topics. In each of the other ten units a different intercultural aspect of business dealings was included, related to the main topic of the individual unit.

The CCBC student's Portfolio was designed as a self-assessment tool. The descriptors cover five main aspects of business communication, among them also the field of ICC. The three levels of intercultural learning (understanding, tolerance, intercultural communicative competence) have not been strictly observed though, since the Portfolio emphasizes the level of student's independence in dealing with intercultural issues.

The third innovative element of our teaching practice was to expand learning environment beyond classroom walls and times so as to integrate the CCBC Forum discussions into the teaching module, as a vital part of intercultural understanding. Namely, the intercultural topics discussed in the classroom within each unit would be resumed on the Forum in a slightly modified version, giving students the possibility to discuss these issues in a wider, intercultural environment and confront their opinions with peers around the world. The lively discussions that took place on the CCBC Forum as well as swift responses to the various queries lead us to believe that the integration of all these elements may be quite productive in terms of ICC acquisition.

This new approach to intercultural communication was based on a more complex definition of culture, building mainly on interpretations found in Hofstede's works (1980, 1997).

1. A CASE STUDY OF INTERCULTURAL OBSERVATIONS

1. *Assessment of recent developments*

After the general introduction of ideas and assumptions on the development of this course on cross-cultural issues the following chapter illustrates how this approach was put into practice.

One of the main aims of the CCBC project is to develop students' ICC skills. This is done in several different forms throughout the project. Students gather information about partner countries, their customs, geographical data and economy. When replying to each other's letters they should react to culturally marked documents which helps them develop the ability to resolve misunderstandings and build empathy towards different ways of thinking. Besides these they are also given the opportunity to observe their own culturally conditioned reactions from the outside, thus developing „the ability to decentre and take up the perspective of the listener or reader" (see above: Byram, 1997:3).

Before outlining the details of the methodology and results of the mini survey, the notion of culture as understood and interpreted within the CCBC project is given here. For the reasons discussed later, the writers of the teaching material created in the project took Hofstede's definition of culture as their starting point. According to him: „Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede:1994 p. 5.).

Although as Hofstede puts it „a persons behaviour is only partially determined by his or her mental programs" (Hofstede:1994 p. 4.), for business and management purposes and also for the purposes of this project culture can be defined as „a set of values which shape attitudes, and influence behaviour." (Handy p.3)

Throughout the CCBC project students are encourage to look at both sides of the coin, that is, the try to establish their own 'mental programming' or 'set of values' and that of their partners. They do this by observing their own reactions to different situations and also by discussing the behaviour of their peers from partner countries.

2.2. *An instrument for a mini survey*

The unit of the teaching materials which focuses on introducing intercultural observations is Unit 2 Establishing an international network. This unit is used at the beginning of project work when students introduce themselves to their partners in the project. Introduction is done at several levels, from personal to national. They start by writing descriptions of their groups, schools and countries. Besides looking at a country's geography students' attention is drawn to national symbols like flags, illustrations on national currency coins and notes, etc. The tool designed to facilitate the process of students' observing themselves from the outside is a questionnaireⁱⁱ based on Hofstede's five dimensions (Hofstede:1997). Although Hofstede's framework of cultural dimensions has been widely criticised and its controversies have been outlined in the literature, it was found that it is suitable for the purposes of the project. Our aim in the CCBC project is to provide students with insights into other cultural backgrounds and to draw their attention to potential difficulties when communicating in an international context. The purpose of the mini survey is to give students a tool to make observations about their own cultural environment. Hofstede's five dimensions, namely power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity and long versus short term orientation, seemed suitable for many reasons. First of all, it is a very well worked out framework which is easily understood. This is important because our undergraduate students do not have previous knowledge in the field of intercultural communication. The framework also gives the most important categories one can observe when studying a particular culture. It also raises students' awareness about the origins of cultural misunderstandings and problems. A practical aspect of the choice was that this framework could easily be adapted for the purposes of the project as there are findings about many nationalities of the world and students can compare their own results with scores of larger scale research. The questionnaire used by the students can be seen in Appendix 2.

2.3. Application of the instrument

The questionnaire is administered within the groups of students from the same nationality. Before looking at the questionnaire itself terms used by Hofstede (1997) like „the software of the mind", „mental programming" are clarified. Then the five dimensions are introduced with explanations. At this point students are asked to work in small groups and discuss the different statements which represent the two extremes of a certain dimension. They decide to what extent their own cultural environment can be placed at one or the other end of the scale and give a score from 1 to 10 accordingly. Finally, students are asked to calculate the average scores and write a short description of the results about their own environment with interpretations to their foreign partners.

2.4. Outcome of the mini survey

Students sent the results of the mini survey to the website either as a document or as a message on the Forum. Groups from the different countries presented the findings in different ways. Some groups preferred giving the findings in a composition format others gave the scores with some interpretation. In Table 2 a summary of the results of the latter group can be seen.

Dimension	German group	Indian group	Hungarian group
Power distance	46 (typical: 35)	80	62
Uncertainty avoidance	44 (typical: 65)	50	76
Individualism- collectivism	46 (typical: 67)	50	68
Masculinity - femininity	40 (typical: 66)	60	55
Long or short term orientation	52 (typical: 31)	60	32

Table 2: A comparison of students' results

These results were arrived at by compiling the questionnaire (Appendix ii below) and summing up students' average values. Hofstede's (1980) research provided students of some nationalities with the possibility to compare their results with values of their „Country Indices", which are indicated as „typical" in the Table 2.

The students who used the verbal way of presenting their data quoted the statements given in the questionnaire to describe their own perception of their environment. Lithuanians, for example, list the claims which they thought are relevant about their society, e.g.:

„In our country it's normal that parents teach their children obedience in spite of treating children as equal."

In the description of Estonia students referred to the original claims and also added their own interpretations of them, e.g.:

„What about individualism and collectivism? In the Soviet Union there was collectivism, but nowadays individualism is present in the country. Everyone looks after him/herself, children learn to think in terms of „I", diplomas increase economic worth and self-respect. Money is the main value in the country."

In their composition they also compare Estonia to Sweden as a truly democratic country, where the score of power distance is supposed to be low as opposed to Estonia which „is a very large power distance republic, because powerful people have privileges".

2.5. Difficulties

Some of the groups expressed the problems they had when they wanted to categorise their own countries according to Hofstede's dimensions. They had the feeling that people are so different that they cannot really be characterised along these „rigid „ lines. The Slovenian group, for example, described their difficulties as follows:

„We tried to find out what mental programming is most significant for Slovenians but we soon discovered that even in our group this programming is very various. It was hard to make any conclusions about our society."

The other difficulty expressed was that some groups, when they compared their results to the findings of earlier research, found considerable differences (see: German group's results in Table 2). They also mention this problem in their interpretation and speculate about the reasons behind as in the following instance:

„Do you know why our results differ from the German average?

Aren't we representative because we are all young students, or is culture changing because of things like September 11th, new information structures like Internet and globalization. Are we going to live in one „melting pot" culture?"

As stereotyping should be avoided students are encouraged to express their problems and difficulties in applying the framework in their analyses. They also discussed on the Forum to what extent Hofstede's metaphor of the „software of the mind" can be stretched:

„Just like software is essential for computers, culture determines the way people think and behave. Furthermore, culture can change like software can be updated."

„The possibility to update software is a chance and a risk at the same time, cause it may lead to some new problems. In fact some „minds/systems" are not updatable."

2.6. Concluding remarks

By way of conclusion, reactions and results of students' mini survey suggest that this exercise helped students to observe their own cultural setting from the outside. It gave them the opportunity to learn and investigate their own „mental programming" and to contrast and compare it to that of other nations'. They also expressed the usefulness of the task as the Hungarian group put it:

„We think this was an interesting experiment and we would like to ask you to investigate your thinking in the same dimensions. In our opinion it would be instructive to compare the different nation's cultural understanding."

The analysis of students' reaction to this exercise suggests that it served its original purpose, namely, it helped raising students' awareness about cultural differences, that is, about different 'software of the mind' or 'sets of values' which lie behind their own reactions and expectations as well as those of their foreign partners. Moreover, they seem to be aware of the dangers of jumping to quick conclusions on the basis of results of the mini survey and they raise issues relevant for the understanding of another set of „mental programming". It would also be interesting to use the same questionnaire to observe what assumptions they have about their partners' cultural environment. Thus their awareness of stereotypes would be raised and the results could lead to discussions among themselves and with the foreign partner groups to what extent awareness of stereotypes help in international business communication or whether there are certain situations where stereotypes hinder communication across cultures.

2. STUDENTS' PRODUCTION

1. Students' production on the project website <http://www.2cbc.net/>

The website is a unique tool without which it would be impossible to achieve the goals of the project. It allows us to link students' classroom work with their peer groups around the world, to harmonise progress of individual groups with all their virtual partners, as well as to use it as a showcase of all students' accomplishments. Namely, students download their work (presentations, advertisements, letters) as they create the different documents, but also need to refer to the website in order to find relevant information about their "business partners".

The table below indicates which groups have posted a particular presentation or task (marked by a yellow tick) and which documents are still missing at a certain point (marked by a red X).



	INTRODUCTIONS	ADVERTISEMENTS	LETTERS	APPLICATION FORMS	FORUM	LINKS	EXERCISES	UNITES	HOME
COUNTRY	CULTURAL	DOS AND DON'T'S	SCHOOLS	GROUPS	COMPANY PROFILES				
	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	✓	✓	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	✓	X	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	✓	X	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
	✓	X	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	✓	X	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
	✓	X	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
	✓	X	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	✓	X	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	✓	X	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	✓	✓	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Our main aim is to equip our students as best as we can for doing business with different countries, using English as a *lingua franca* at all times. It should be kept in mind, though, that the teachers, i.e. trainers do not necessarily have any experience of the target cultures linked in the network, which means that the project is a journey of discovery for everybody involved.

We feel that work on the project promotes understanding and appreciation between students originating from different countries and cultures, although this does not happen immediately or spontaneously. Students or teachers may not normally be interested in each other for various reasons, e.g. the countries being "small" or less powerful, or too distant from each other, with no tradition of contact or cooperation.

The CCBC website offers students another possibility to acquire intercultural insights, namely by participating to the Discussion Forum.

Presumably, all the students' production will reveal something about their particular cultural imprint, but the Forum gives them an opportunity to discuss certain intercultural issues in a straightforward way. In one group there are specific questions connected to the units we use in teaching. Students are invited to comment on those regularly and also read what their peers have written on that topic. Many of the questions here involve the usual behaviour in business situations, e.g. the question of punctuality, dress codes, levels of formality, use of humour and the like. (Example from the forum: **How do you identify the level of formality in different meetings? Give us a few tips, please.**)

In a separate group of questions, students can ask and discuss topics of their interest, often dealing with everyday life issues, such as: Could a film star become president in your country? This question provoked a lively discussion. The students' comments showed certain differences between the countries, but also varying opinions within a single country, which indicated yet again that no nation is monolithic and that we should avoid stereotyping.

3.2. Examples of group presentation with samples of students' informal introductions

The main purpose of student's introductions and country presentations is for students to link up, acquaint themselves with their peer-groups, their environment and working background and thus form a virtual team.

However, when guided to closer observation of these presentations students can gather quite a few insights. They may discover facts and figures they did not know about, but even more interesting is the choice of these. We can safely assume that students choose to present things which matter to them, features they are proud of. Again, knowing something about the country your business partner comes from is one way of showing respect and creating a good relationship, while such information may also provide us with insights of socio-cultural nature.



"Hi! My name is Zdravka and I'm from a little and beautiful country Croatia. I'm 21 and currently I'm third year student of economy. My hobby is football but I'm not playing it (except on PlayStation) but only rooting for my favorite club. I also love animals very much, especially dogs (I'm the pride owner of a terrier called Rex). Collecting things is also one of my hobbies. I collect stamps and coins from countries all around the world. The last thing I would like to mention about myself is traveling. I adore visiting foreign countries and I would like to travel to faraway exotic places."

"Hello! I've never thought of introducing myself on the Internet with words such as this: "My name is Robert, I study economics, and so on, and so on". Rather than that I was looking for new approach and by now I think I have figured it out. If somebody is to say that he/she knows me, they must, or better, they should know things about me, things I consider much more important then: "My name is..."."

For me inner peace and harmony are to be found through yoga, fun is always where the friends are and love is where my girlfriend is. Besides, when music is on, game of chess and a cup of green tea with my roommate are just the right anti-stress therapy that I sometimes need. As you may know being a student is more than just learning so have fun and be well!"

3.3. Examples of country presentations (excerpts): Croatia, Estonia, Italy, Slovenia



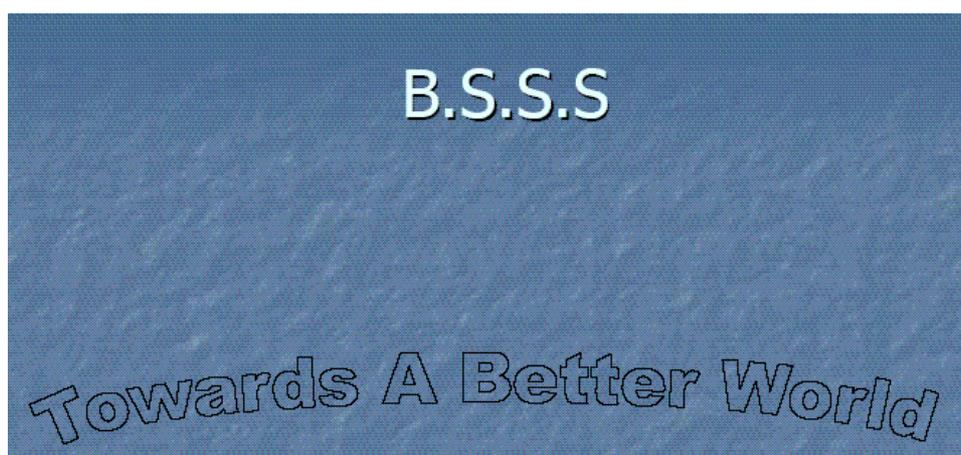


← Slovenian national costume

SLOVENIANS

We are very happy people. We sing, dance and drink a lot. Our country is known by its delicious wines, which we consume regularly. Besides this, we are hard working people and we always try to do our best. We are good at sports and that's how we usually promote our country on international scale. Tolerance is our main concern and it is promoted specially among youth.

3.4. Examples of school presentations (India, Estonia, Italy, Romania)



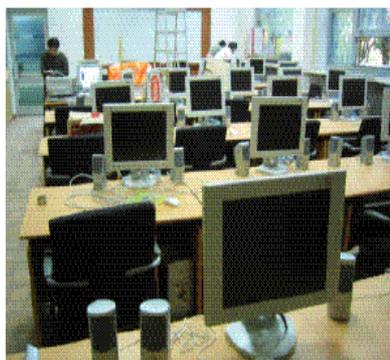
TALLINNA TEHNIKALIIKOOL
KURESSAARE KOLLEDŽ

OUR SCHOOL

Our school is called I.T.C.G. Marchetti and is situated near the centre of Tarcento, Udine. It offers courses for foreign language correspondents. We study three languages, English, German, and French. From the third year on we study special languages, such as English for Tourism and Literature, and in the fourth year we start with Business English.

The school buildings is small but there are two floors on which there are eight classrooms, a multimedia and a computer room, a language and a science lab. The school organizes some cultural exchanges with other schools. The school organizes a project called "OFFICINA STUDENTI" where the students simulate a company. They produce an object and they sell it. The students that are involved in this activity have a lot of responsibility and they can also win a prize. Besides, the school organizes some courses called "ECDL" to obtain the European Computer Driving License. On these courses teachers teach us how to use the computer, in particular WORD, EXCEL, ACCESS, POWER POINT and also the INTERNET.

ASE Bucharest



3.5. Examples of promotional materials created by students for their virtual companies (Lithuania, Estonia, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary)



Woodpecker

2003 Autumn

Hardwood furniture catalog



Are you interested in making your business more successful?

If you are, you should CHECK the following points:

✓ **Would you like to have a free advertisement in the Internet?**

A web page is the best way to promote your company.

✓ **Would you like to have close contact with your customers?**

Registration of orders could be delivered by using the Internet.

Is your country, your culture too small for you?
Do you want to **REACH BEYOND YOUR BORDERS**?
We can help you!

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iB  **orders**

Cooperating with other countries, other cultures is indispensable – but not easy.
We offer you information on intercultural business opportunities,
we help you work on your strategy,
we advertise for you all over the world,
we collect information you need,
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We do what you need – tailor-made!

Benefit from the work and experience of the others!
Order our magazine NOW!

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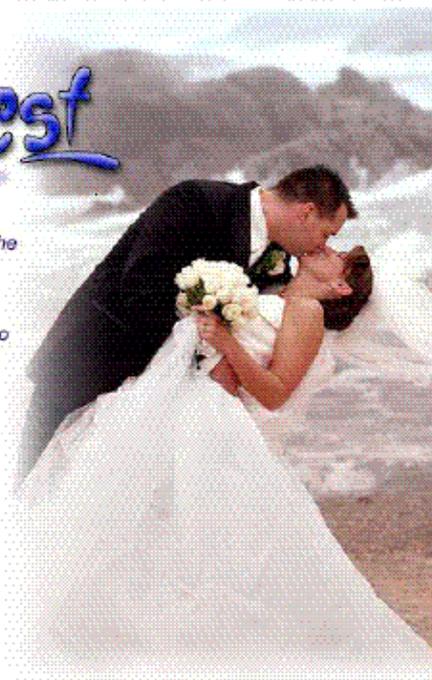
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Every person in his life has the important dates. Obviously, you want to remember it!?
Are you sure how you want to spend it?
Don't make a mistake!

WE DO IT WITH STYLE:

- * anniversaries
- * weddings
- * birthdays
- * baptisms
- * proms ...



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As an example of what opportunities this kind of network offers to participants we can describe an interesting collaboration between two virtual companies. The Slovenian group provided a range of marketing services for their partners from India: they produced advertisements for the Indian food company and carried out a market research regarding Indian food in which all Central European partners have been included (Italy, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, and Romania). This research showed that none of the students have actually been to an Indian restaurant and would like it very much to taste Indian food. On the other hand, the older generation, for example in Slovenia, was much more reluctant to explore new tastes. In this case the virtual experiment was translated into completely realistic insights, data that an Indian company trying to enter European markets (or vice versa), would actually benefit from greatly. The task was not only useful for students' linguistic and professional development, but also had direct bearing on improving their cultural knowledge and skills.

3.6. Student's discussions

Below are some examples of discussions within the forum and a selection of answers.

A man goes into a bar with a woman. They sit at a table. When the waiter comes to take orders, does he usually address the man or the woman? Why?

It depends on the waiter who is serving the couple. The situation is Croatia is rather free-minded so it is a case to case approach. Sometimes the waiter talks to the lady first and sometimes not. It is impossible to make a general situation of this topic. (CROATIA)

I think that the Austrian waiters always address both, the man and the woman. That's the moment when the man shows, whether he is a gentleman or not by letting the lady order first, or not. (AUSTRIA)

It depends. In Italy men and women are equal, so it isn't important if the waiter addresses the woman or the man first. However, sometimes the waiter addresses the woman because he wants to be polite, not for other reasons. (ITALY)

According to the Romanian good-manners code, at the restaurant a woman shouldn't talk to the waiter, the man does all the talking. But I've noticed that this custom is not respected any more, neither by the clients or the waiter because it's old, and perhaps some people never heard of it. I don't respect it either. Nowadays the waiter asks the woman first, than the man or he asks both. That's how things are in Romania. (ROMANIA)

Would you normally hold the door open to allow a woman/girl to enter a restaurant/classroom/building/car first? Why? Why not?

This is just wishful thinking with us! Yes, as a girl, I would like to be treated with some more respect, but I guess I will have to wait until I am older. It seems that people in my generation do not pay much attention to gender when it comes to "Ladies first" and such behaviour. We are pretty equal! (SLOVENIA)

Nowadays, in general, in Italy, a man goes in first in a restaurant to see that everything is all right. On the other hand, when they go out it is polite to let a woman in first because it is kind. (ITALY)

We think that a boy or a man doesn't hold the door open to allow a woman enter a car first. Unfortunately, nowadays this custom is lost and it's used only in certain cases like weddings. Personally we think that for young people this form of kindness is not necessary. Alessia, Francesca, Stefania (ITALY)

The two questions above refer to gender issues, and the answers might indicate to what extent traditional etiquette is observed in certain situations in a particular country. Since the respondents are all of the same age group, it is not surprising that their answers provide similar information. They show that gender differences are disappearing (at least in these situations), but also seem to point out that youngsters are aware of traditional good manners, however, hardly anyone bothers to observe these rules in everyday life.

With this we wanted to point out that even traditional good manners may be different in different countries and the fact that students discussed this point will alert them to such differences.

What is the role of money in your lives? Has the role of money changed in your country lately?

In France, money is very important, you can do anything you want, especially on the French Riviera where the corruption is much spread. (FRANCE)

In Italy there are a lot of expensive cities with expensive shops or bars, but there are also cities that are much cheaper; that's a matter of choice, you decide how much you would like to spend!! In the past there was a lot of hypocrisy about the topic of money in Italy, but nowadays the attitude is changing. However, we should always remember that money is a means, not a value!! Tania (ITALY)

When would you ask for a discount in your every day life?

Whenever I am buying big and expensive goods in Austria, for example: cars, furniture, etc. (AUSTRIA)

Romania was under Turkish rule a long time. Therefore it is customary to try to bargain every time. Who is not able to bargain is considered stupid or "fraier", a word which comes from the German

"Frei Herr" - they didn't bargain. Discounts are part of our life although it is legal for a firm in Romania to practice discounts only for a 3 months/year time. This Discount time starts usually after the 15.01 to artificially rise demand. Most of the firms do not respect this stupid regulation. (ROMANIA)

The questions about money issues are always interesting and particularly relevant to future business people since neglecting some subtle cultural differences, such as timing, local practices, hierarchies, etc. can be damaging in dealing with foreign business partners. The answers to these and similar questions will indicate to our students if there are significant differences between other countries and their own in this area, and where sensitivities of particular countries lie. There are other things to be learnt as well: for example, Croatian students were amused to see that Romanians also use words of German origin. They immediately wanted to know if the word "fraier" was used in the same way in Croatian and Romanian. If they found themselves doing business with Romanian partners, they would have a potentially interesting topic of conversation when socializing, which is important in establishing rapport.

3.7. Final Comment

When people travel and do business abroad, they can gain invaluable experience and learn "by doing" (or, as cynics would say, by making mistakes). The CCBC network gives us all a safe environment in which we can present ourselves and learn about the others. If it is true that everything we think and do bears a stamp of our culture, then all that our students produce, both in words and images, has an intrinsic intercultural value, overtly or covertly displaying elements of national or regional cultures. Readers are invited to visit the CCBC website <http://www.2cbc.net/> and explore the results of our networking in the past three years.

3. SUMMING UP

Within the CCBC project a number of approaches to facilitate intercultural learning were tried out with varying degrees of success. An international network of students' groups was set up that interacted in various ways on the Internet. The advantages provided by cyberspace proved extremely motivating for students, since classroom activities and discussions were thus extended to peer-groups around the world and linked through an almost realistic simulation of business communication. Whereas globalising our teaching / learning practices yielded excellent results, the virtual world of the Internet did not lead students naturally to observe intercultural differences and learn about these. A number of methods and approaches were experimented with before achieving satisfactory results by combining various self-exploratory exercises with world knowledge and a guided Discussion Forum. This innovative approach prompted production of tailor-made teaching tools to cater to the specific needs of students and teachers engaging in the CCBC project.

This experimental project proved a great challenge for teachers too. Facilitating intercultural learning and awareness raising meant that the teacher's role in the classroom needed to be reconsidered. The question whether teachers of English (or any other foreign language) can simply be expected to act as intercultural mediators came to the fore and the CCBC project showed how much language teachers themselves can learn from such a process, but also taught us how rewarding it can be to let real world interfere with our classroom practices and lead us in setting up realistic tasks, exercises, discussions.

In view of the fact that ICC is becoming central to foreign language teaching, new developments within the CCBC project can also be expected as we endeavour to enhance further student's intercultural skills. Thus the questions asked in the classroom and on the CCBC webpage may change, the tasks set for students will certainly be altered and further refined. However, the overall approach based on promoting self-knowledge and developing understanding, awareness, respect for cultural diversity and otherness, one fostering empathy and a sense of unity among students from various backgrounds linked in an expanded, globalised classroom, seems highly productive for future practices as well.

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