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Developing Adult Learners' Language Competence in Culture-Based Blended-Learning Course

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Abstract. During the last two decades, due to technological possibilities and the spread of the Internet, new forms of learning have originated as an alternative to traditional face-to-face learning – e-learning, online learning, hybrid learning, blended learning, ubiquitous learning, etc. They have become even more popular due to the COVID-19 pandemic as the only solution to implement learning at universities and adult education institutions. This paper will focus on a blended-learning language course designed for adult learners. The aim of the current research is to evaluate the course created and the development of adult learners' English language competence during the course implementation in six EU countries – Croatia, Latvia, Slovenia, Romania, Poland, and the Czech Republic. 227 adult learners and ten English-language teachers were involved in the course piloting. Research methods applied: learners' survey after the course completion, unstructured observation of learners done by teachers during the course, and structured interviews with the teachers after the course implementation. In this paper, the observation results and the findings from teachers' interviews will be analysed. The findings highlight both positive aspects and challenges of the course created. Learners have gained cultural knowledge, increased their vocabulary, and developed reading skills, while at the same time improvements in developing learners' listening and writing skills are also required.[1]

Keywords: blended learning, language competence, interaction

Introduction

Nowadays, "in a digitalized society blended learning has become a favorable approach in adult education" (Cocquyt et al. 2019: 1), gaining momentum

1 The research was conducted in the framework of the Erasmus+ project *Cultural Knowledge and Language Competences as Means to Develop 21st-Century Skills* (Project No. 2018-1-HR-01-KA204-047430; 2018–2021).

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in higher education because of its flexibility of time and place when offering courses to a very diverse student population (Boelens–Voet–De Wever 2018). Although initially flexibility, place, and pace were considered the main benefits of blended learning, more recent studies highlight its opportunities to target students' individual needs in terms of the course content and teaching/learning methodologies (Boelens–Voet–De Wever 2018, Cocquyt et al. 2019), interaction between teachers and students securing more learner engagement as well as cost effectiveness (Rasheed–Kamsin–Aniza 2020). Blended learning corresponds with the social constructivism approach to learning, and thus it is suitable for adult learners. Since interaction takes place in face-to-face and online modes, it provides both social and dialogical learning experiences (Cocquyt et al. 2019) in a dynamic learning environment fostering learners' social and interactive skills, language competences and helps language learners use their cognitive skills in becoming active recipients, exploring new learning tools, collaborating and interacting with other learners as well as reflecting on their performance (Kaya 2015). The approach ensures interaction among the teachers and learners, and therefore it is applicable in second language teaching/learning.

In 2013, Castaño Muñoz and colleagues implied that "by 2030 adult learning will be ubiquitous learning" (Castaño Muñoz et al. 2013: 174), taking place anywhere and at any time by using various technological devices such as PC, smartphones, tablets, WebPads, GPS, multimedia, etc. The use of ICT and other technologies will be a regular part of adult learning. Seven years later, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it became a reality for all educational stages, when most of the world switched over to online teaching/learning, and online and blended learning became the "new normal" (Bruggeman et al. 2021: 2, Moser–Wei–Brenner 2021: 10). This also causes "ongoing changes in language pedagogy, including but not limited to the expanded use of online learning in place of face-to-face instruction" (MacIntyre–Gregersen–Mercer 2020: 11). In the context of blended learning, this means that the face-to-face stage is implemented in an online mode using various learning platforms and other technological means instead of real-class meetings.

This paper will focus on a blended-learning language course for adult learners created within the Erasmus+ project *Cultural Knowledge and Language Competences as Means to Develop 21st-Century Skills* involving Croatia, Latvia, Slovenia, Romania, Poland, and the Czech Republic (Project No 2018-1-HR-01-KA204-047430; 2018-2021) and will evaluate the development of adult learners' English language competence attained during the course implementation in the partner countries.

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Theoretical background
The approach

Globalization and technological advancement have affected people's lives in nearly all fields, and the role of English continues to increase. At the same time, although the goal of any second language learning is communication, recent studies (Chvala 2020) show that communication contexts are changing and a more globally oriented, multilingual approach to ELT is required, one that stimulates awareness of sociolinguistic realities.

Traditionally, language learning in a university setting comprises three challenges: the high number of students per class, the different levels of students' language proficiency, and the challenge of speaking in a foreign language to other groupmates for whom it is possible to communicate in their mother tongue (Bueno-Alastuey–López-Pérez 2014). Blended learning may help solve these challenges as it ensures a more individualized approach to learner engagement in activities, and, consequently, it "can certainly enrich the language learning experience of our students" (Lungu 2013: 471). Moreover, as argued by Nagy, in the future, "the traditional face-to-face communication in the language classroom must be combined or blended with distant, Internet-mediated learning" (2019: 135), which has now become a reality.

Yalçinkaya finds that the blended-learning approach combines "the advantages of e-learning and traditional learning (classroom teaching). The flexibility of e-learning is linked with the social component of face-to-face teaching" (2015: 1062), which is especially suitable for younger net generations that have grown up in the contemporary digital world. Therein Clark's (2020) approach to teaching/learning comprising four components is very typical: 1) the highly controlled receptive instruction, 2) behavioural instruction focussing on gradual skill development, 3) the situated guided discovery approach, which is based on constructivism and social constructivism approaches to learning, and 4) exploratory instruction ensuring high learner control. With respect to language teaching/learning, Yalçinkaya (2015) considers that the receptive stage means the informal acquisition of the material, the behavioural or directive stage strengthens the learners' response, knowledge is constructed in the guided discovery stage, and during the exploratory stage of learning learners are exposed to real-world tasks and resources. Hampel (2006) also highlights the role of meaningful activities that are closely connected to learners' actual communicative needs and have a real-world outcome such as solving some actual problem, reaching a compromise in a problem-based discussion, solving a puzzle, etc.

The above-mentioned approach uses the regular way of content design in language teaching, comprising warm-up tasks (introduction), the task (the new material covered), comprehension tasks (checking learners' skill development),

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and post-tasks (the phase of strengthening learners' language skills). However, nowadays, learning outcomes are not only learning a language for everyday communication but also developing skills to apply the language for information search, analysing and synthesising the information, creative problem solving, and others. To attain these goals, tasks must be meaningful. According to Samuda and Bygate (2008), a task should be a holistic activity enabling learners to use a language in solving a non-linguistic outcome. Their approach coincides with that of Hampel (2006) mentioned above. In other words, language is a tool used for obtaining information and developing other 21st-century skills.

Parallels can be drawn with task-based learning, the framework of which – as indicated by Masuram and Sripada (2020) – comprises three main phases: 1) pre-task, 2) task cycle consisting of task, planning, and report, and 3) post-task stage.

The same structure has been observed throughout all the modules of the target course as well. Each module is a story that has an introduction, the main part, and a conclusion. Various language tasks are incorporated in the module, but each of them is created containing the same three-stage structure. This kind of approach not only ensures the three stages of presenting the material but also contributes to active and exciting learning. Learners read the background and the introduction to the situation and are curious to see how the story continues and how it will end. It is crucial because in online learning the quality of learning activities is more significant than the time spent on doing the module. Therefore, "resources should excel in clarity and relevance; activities should promote active learning and interaction" (McNaught–Lam–Cheng 2012: 284).

As the aim of any language learning involves the development of both receptive and productive skills, it is essential to choose the most appropriate mode of learning for each of them. Buran and Evseeva (2015) argue that the development of receptive skills should form the online learning component, whereas productive skills should be developed in face-to-face classes. However, productive skills may also be developed in the online phase of blended learning by doing guided writing tasks.

Learning vocabulary

A crucial element of foreign language learning is vocabulary, as all language skills are based on vocabulary (Jia–Chen–Ding–Ruan 2012). Vocabulary learning comprises both developing receptive knowledge, which is acquired through listening and reading, and productive knowledge acquired through speaking and writing (Schmitt 2000). Vocabulary learning and grammar are part of language use, and according to the paradigm shift in language learning: "language use activities should be embedded in the activities of the skills", which means that

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they "should be linked to the specific skill they refer to, and in a later stage, they could be completely integrated in the used skill" (Krajcso–Frimmel 2017: 12). Thus, vocabulary is acquired in a complex way, and it is closely related to the given context. Traditionally, vocabulary tasks include true/false, matching, multiple-choice questions, gap filling, and answers to the questions. They can be divided into two groups – selecting and filling. According to Jia, Chen, Ding, and Ruan (2012), selecting and matching tasks correspond to recognition activities while filling to the recall activities. In line with constructivism theory, recalling tasks are more useful than recognition ones as they involve learners' personal experiences and thus ensure more personalized and meaningful learning. Therefore, recall activities should be incorporated in a blended-learning course. In turn, Ou Yang and Wen-Chi (2015) claim that a list of vocabulary learning strategies, such as word card strategy (using e-dictionaries or web dictionaries in learning words), synonym and antonym strategy (using online sources for word lists), imagery strategy (using visual images to represent words), grouping strategy (grouping vocabulary in semantic fields such as topics, categories, and scenes), are applicable to online learning stages as well. Lu and Chang (2016) offer a similar approach suggesting grouping vocabulary in semantic sets (synonyms, antonyms), communicative sets (according to authentic conversation situation important for interpersonal relationship), and situational sets (using the context or situation wherein words are grouped in clusters).

Developing reading skills

Considering reading skills, learners use online reading strategies that differ from traditional reading strategies for printed text. Li (2020) claims that learners often face challenges of selecting and evaluating the texts when reading online sources, as these sources contain hyperlinks leading to other materials, which makes the material very extensive, and learners have to apply information processing, analysis, and synthesis skills all the time. However, hyperlinks may be used to create links between separate articles, thus ensuring a consistent and systematic approach to language learning by creating relationships between the material acquired and the new material (Shishkovskaya–Bakalo–Grigoryev 2015), which helps enhance the already developed language skills.

In practice, creating the material for reading has several challenges. Firstly, the suitability of the content and language level of the selected text. In most cases, it might be necessary to adapt the text to the target group. Secondly, the hyperlinks provided to online sources for additional reading may change in the course of the time, and the information will not be available there anymore. Therefore, it is recommended to include several links to additional information. Moreover, tasks

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should be designed in such a way that learners are able to do them even if some of the additional links have stopped working.

Developing speaking skills

Lackman (2010) identifies the following speaking sub-skills: fluency, accuracy with words and pronunciation, using functions, appropriacy, turn-taking skills, relevant length, responding and initiating, repair and repetition, range of words and grammar, and discourse markers.

Traditionally, speaking skills are developed in face-to-face classrooms. In the blended-learning approach, they can be developed in the classroom and through online interaction on chats and forums. Role-plays, simulations, webquests, project work, case studies, brainstorming, picture description, and visualization are some of the examples of tasks included in the target course. Language games are also useful in developing speaking and listening skills and in increasing learners' vocabulary. However, online language games have to match certain criteria to best fulfil their function. Based on an empirical research involving 100 language learners, Yip and Kwan (2006) conclude that online learning games have to ensure interaction with others, include audio-visual effects, provide the ability to select various roles, have a clearly defined scenario, and in order to sustain learners' motivation a balance between challenge and satisfaction should be observed.

Additionally, such language learning tasks as argumentation, role-plays, videoconferencing, collaborative and cooperative tasks further learners' interaction (Fandiño–Velandia 2020). The target course adopts most of these activities. Some of the challenges concerning speaking tasks are connected with managing group work and pair work in an online phase. The teacher's presence and constant monitoring of the pedagogical process is necessary, wherefore it will be complicated, hardly possible to apply these activities on autonomous online learning. They are more useful for an organized and managed study process both in face-to-face and online phases.

Developing writing skills

As mentioned above, writing skills are productive skills. Hence, it is essential to involve learners in producing some definite output such as e-mails, letters, postcards, posters, etc. If writing e-mails and letters seem an ordinary activity, using listservs may be practised online, and it may motivate learners' participation in writing activities. As explained by Erben, Ban, and Castañeda (2009: 122): "listservs allow a group of people with a common interest to join and participate

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in an organized moderated email discussion group. A listserv is created with readily available software programs. Once the listserv has been established, users send an email to the listserv address and all members of that list receive an email in their inbox." Similarly, learners can use writeboards – "a web-based space that can be shared in collaborative projects, or edited by individual writers" (Erben–Ban–Castañeda 2009: 132). Their advantage lies in the fact that learners can collaborate on creating a joint project. Learners develop their writing skills and collaboration and team working skills as well. Another option is the use of various chats and forums initiated by both learners and teachers. For technologically more savvy learners, it is possible to include wikis in the course. "A wiki is a collaborative website that many people can work on and edit" (Erben–Ban–Castañeda 2009: 133). Wikis ensure student-centred learning, and they are in line with the constructivist learning paradigm, as learners create their own content, and they have absolute control over the content created. A simpler writing task is a blog in which learners express their point of view on some topical issue and upload it on the webpage. Erben, Ban, and Castañeda (2009) divide blogs into the following groups: 1) vlogs – comprising videos, 2) linklogs – comprising links, 3) sketchlogs – comprising sketches, and 4) photoblogs or photo logs (flogs) – comprising photos. All of them may be applicable to language teaching/learning. What is more, in the next step, they may be linked with a speaking activity, thus securing the development of two productive language skills – writing and speaking. Writing e-mails, blogs, postcards, letters, etc. are some of the tasks used in the target course as well. However, the challenges address the following aspects: the topic must be significant to learners, clear guidelines are required, and learners might need more guidance with less traditional approaches such as wikis, listservs, vlogs, and flogs.

Developing listening skills

The development of speaking skills is inseparable from listening skills. Traditionally, listening tasks comprise pre-task, or warm-up, the task, and the post-task. Listening is an essential component of the online part of the course. It comprises pre-recorded dialogues, monologues, and group discussions uploaded on the learning platform in the form of audio or video recordings. However, it is also possible to include links to existing podcasts, vodcasts, and audioblogs on the Web.

All in all, the question remains open as to whether to use authentic texts recorded by native speakers or the texts should be adapted and recorded by speakers of different nationalities, thus giving learners' an exposure to various pronunciations and accents. The first approach enables learners to experience

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standard English pronunciation, whereas the second one prepares them for functioning in a multicultural environment. In the target course, the second approach has been selected.

The learning environment

The online environment may "foster additional social interaction, through both synchronous and asynchronous communication" (Boelens–De Wever–Voet 2017: 7). What is more, it may be used to monitor the learning process and measure learners' success. According to previous studies, it "is often used to individualize the learning process" (Boelens–De Wever–Voet 2017: 12). Online projects involve learners in group work with diverse individuals, consequently enhancing the development of learners' collaboration and cooperation skills (Maulan–Raihan 2012). Moser, Wei, and Brenner find that "well-designed courses clarify learner expectations with regard to technological tools and skills as well as assignments. In addition, they rely on multiple tools to foster student learning, opportunities for interaction, and resources to guide learners when they experience technological difficulties" (2021: 3). Consequently, the following practices are significant for successful language teaching online: building and supporting a community of learners through learning tasks, facilitating interaction, integrating synchronous and asynchronous oral and written experience exchange in online chatrooms and face-to-face sessions (Moser–Wei–Btenner 2021, Meskill–Anthony 2015). Previous research (Saeed–Yang–Sinnappan 2009) shows that: students prefer using both synchronous and asynchronous online communication; they are flexible and ready to use multiple communication channels; the choice of technologies depends on the learning styles; technologies positively impact their learning outcomes as well.

A further analysis will be provided in the subsequent sections of the article focussing on the development of learners' skills, the platform, and the course evaluation.

Research methodology

The aim of this research is to evaluate the target course created and the development of adult learners' English language competence during the course implementation in six EU countries.

Research question: Can the target course be used to successfully develop adult learners' English language competence, and what improvements are required therein?

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Research design: The research applies a concurrent mixed-methods research design, which is "typically used when the quantitative and qualitative approaches provide complementary information that will enable a more complete, or a more accurate, account of the phenomenon of interest" (O'Hanlon 2019: 117), and it corresponds to the interpretivist paradigm.

The sample of this study comprises ten English teachers from six partner countries, five having PhD degree, four master's degree, and one a bachelor's degree. Three teachers were from Romania, two from Latvia, two from Poland, and one English teacher from Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and Croatia. All of them were experienced in teaching adult learners of various target groups such as regular students, teachers, police officers, and adult learners requiring special educational treatment such as the unemployed, senior learners, those with learning barriers, etc. Their teaching experience ranged between 7 and 32 years.

Research methods: 1) data collection – learners' unstructured observation done by teachers, structured interviews with teachers, 2) mixed-methods data analysis strategies – data transformation and data comparison (O'Hanlon 2019) comprising the following steps: 1. coding of quantitative data, 2. creating the matrix for data analysis, 3. conducting descriptive and inferential statistics analysis of quantitative data, 4. coding qualitative data, 5. eliciting quotations/statements from qualitative data on the aspects analysed in the quantitative research, 6. making comparisons to elicit similarities (to confirm the quantitative results) and differences (to show all the spectrum of opinions). In the given research, as it is typical of concurrent mixed-methods research designs, data integration is done in the data analysis stage.

Research process: The interactive culture-based blended-learning language course comprises eighteen modules. Each learner studied one module (~20–30-hour input) independently and during class sessions from February to April 2019. Teachers monitored the process and provided support. 242 learners from Croatia, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia started the course, and 227 completed it (for the results of students' survey, cf. Luka 2019). The reasons for dropping out: illness, change of university, conflicting work schedules, too difficult. After completing the course, learners filled in a face-to-face feedback questionnaire. Teachers observed learners during the whole study process, took notes on each learners' progress (learners' success, problems, overall comments, final evaluation), and filled in the evaluation form (27 five-point Likert scale questions and one open question).

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Findings. The course

The *European Cultural Heritage and Skills Development Course* is a blended-learning course applying CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodology, the content of which is related to the rich intangible European cultural heritage of the partner countries. It is presented in the form of a story/script, applying innovative methodologies and tools (webquests, case studies, vialogues, videos, audios, design thinking tools, interactive games, etc.) aiming to increase learners' cultural knowledge, develop their twenty-first-century key skills (collaboration, communication, initiative, creativity, analytical reasoning, problem solving, etc.), and improve learners' English language competence.

In total, there are eighteen modules, three of which on the intangible cultural heritage of each partner country – customs, games, knowledge and skills, cultural spaces, language and oral traditions, performing arts, traditional crafts, and others. The topics are versatile, which enabled creating various kinds of tasks – reading, listening, audio, video, speaking, interactive games, face-to-face, etc.

Each module starts with a warm-up – introduction into the situation that explains the context (situation). The task type depends on the story of the module: matching, gap filling, video, audio, discussion, project work, interactive game, pair work, role-play, etc. The main part comprises online and face-to-face tasks. Their proportion is 30-40% face-to-face and 60-70% online tasks. Learners are guided step by step through the scenarios, and by doing certain tasks (video and audio tasks, interactive on-line games, lexical, reading, writing, grammar tasks, creative tasks – webquests, case studies, problem-solving discussions, project work, etc., and applying design thinking tools such as collabs, visualization, journey mapping, mind mapping, etc.) (cf. Luka 2018) they reach the end of the story, which either gives a solution to the situation or has an open ending to stimulate further discussion on the topic. As mentioned above, out of the 242 learners who started the course, 227 finished it. The information on the learners and the modules studied is summarized in *Table 1*.

Table 1. *Modules and learners by partner country*

The module	Learners (n)	Learners (%)	Learners' country
To be proud of our Dubrovnik's patron saint: St Blaise (HR)	10	4.4	the Czech Republic
Sinjska alka – connection between the past and the present (HR)	13	5.7	Latvia
Gingerbread craft from Northern Croatia (HR)	10	4.4	Poland
How I met the falcons (CZ)	10	4.4	Latvia
The hand puppet's tale (CZ)	10	4.4	Poland

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The module	Learners (n)	Learners (%)	Learners' country
An unforgettable weekend in Studnice (CZ)	14	6.2	Croatia
Autumn and winter traditions and festivals in Latvia (LV)	11	4.8	Poland
Authentic Suiti and Līvi cultural spaces in Latvia (LV)	13	5.7	Romania
Latvian signs and ornaments (LV)	11	4.8	the Czech Republic
Christmas in Poland (PL)	11	4.8	the Czech Republic
Post-war and post-communist heritage in Poland (PL)	10	4.4	Latvia
Local craft and handwork (PL)	10	4.4	Slovenia
The Whitsunday pilgrimage of Şumuleu Ciuc (RO)	16	7.0	Croatia
Christmas carols and New Year wishes in Transylvania (RO)	23	10.1	Slovenia
Lad's dances from Romania (RO)	23	10.1	Slovenia
Martin Krpan, a hero and a smuggler (Sl)	10	4.4	Croatia
Martin Krpan, a hero and a horse owner (Sl)	12	5.3	Romania
Door-to-door rounds of kurenti (Sl)	10	4.4	Romania
18 modules	**227**	**100**	**6 countries**

A summary of all the modules is included in the course curriculum (Luka 2018), and the modules are available on the learning platform: http://e-culture.eu/.

The learning platform

All the teachers positively evaluated the learning platform (M = 4.00–4.55; Mo = 4.00; 5.00). Moreover, the qualitative data obtained from learners' observations confirm the quantitative findings.

There were no significant differences discovered in terms of the module studied (Asymp. Sig. = 0.454), but there were significant differences found as to some variables concerning teachers' countries: "found the platform interactive and creative" (Asymp. Sig. = 0.045), "found the platform well structured" (Asymp. Sig. = 0.033), "found it easy to find the information" (Asym. Sig. = 0.022) and "found it easy to explain it to learners" (Asymp. Sig. = 0.039). The findings indicate that the English teachers from the Czech Republic and Romania found the platform more interactive and creative than their peers from other countries (Mean Rank

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= 15.50 and 12.50 vs. 6.50 and 9.50). For example, the Czech teacher indicates that: "Learner 6 is very positive about the module and the user-friendly platform design. She would suggest the course to other learners as well". The Czech teacher found the platform better structured (Mean Rank = 15.50) and easier to search for information (Mean Rank = 16.50), whereas the Polish teachers assigned a lower score to these aspects (Mean Rank = 3.50 and 3.83 respectively). In turn, Latvian teachers found it more difficult than their peers to explain the platform to the learners (Mean Rank = 3.67 vs. 6.00, 8.33, and 13.00). The following comments confirm this finding: "The student experienced problems in understanding how the platform works and how to find the information online" (Learner 1 from LV), "The student could understand the tasks with some help from the lecturer, but it took him quite long to find answers" (Learner 3 from LV), and "The student could understand and complete the tasks with a lot of help from the lecturer. He dropped out and did not complete all the online tasks of the module" (Learner 10 from LV).

These results indicate that the teacher's support is vital in blended learning, and teachers must be proficient in using technologies, which is another course-related challenge. Although the course contains 60-70% of online tasks, it is more suitable to guided learning than autonomous learning. Furthermore, some teachers might need IT support or even some teaching in digital skills prior to the course delivery.

The modules

Concerning the modules created, the teachers evaluated them highly as well (M = 3.44–4.50; Mo = 4.00; 5.00). They admitted that overall the modules are suitable for adult learners (M = 4.50; Mo = 4.00; 5.00), where 50% of teachers "strongly agreed" and 50% "agreed" with the statement. They substantiate their opinion with answers to other questions, where the overall evaluation is positive (M = 3.44–4.50; Mo = 4.00; 5.00). *Figure 1* summarizes the evaluation of the modules given by the teachers.

The highest evaluation is given to the following variables: "online tasks are interesting for adult learners" (M = 4.50; Mo = 4.00; 5.00), "learners learnt new information about the topic" (M = 4.50; Mo = 4.00; 5.00), and "the story is interesting for adult learners" (M = 4.27; Mo = 4.00).

The teachers observed that the learners liked the course idea and most of the modules. They liked the idea of learning a language through other cultures most of all. Thus, a learner from the Czech Republic admitted that "it's a unique project, which teaches both language and history of other nations" (Learner 3 from CZ). Similar observations have been noted by other teachers: "He was interested in the cultural topic. He liked the tasks and said that he would try out other modules as

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well" (Learner 4 from RO); "The learner was happy to find new information and looked for similarities between his own culture and the one in the module" (Learner 3 from RO); a learner from Croatia thinks that "learning about cultural heritage is important, and therefore he finds the platform very useful" (Learner 10 from HR).

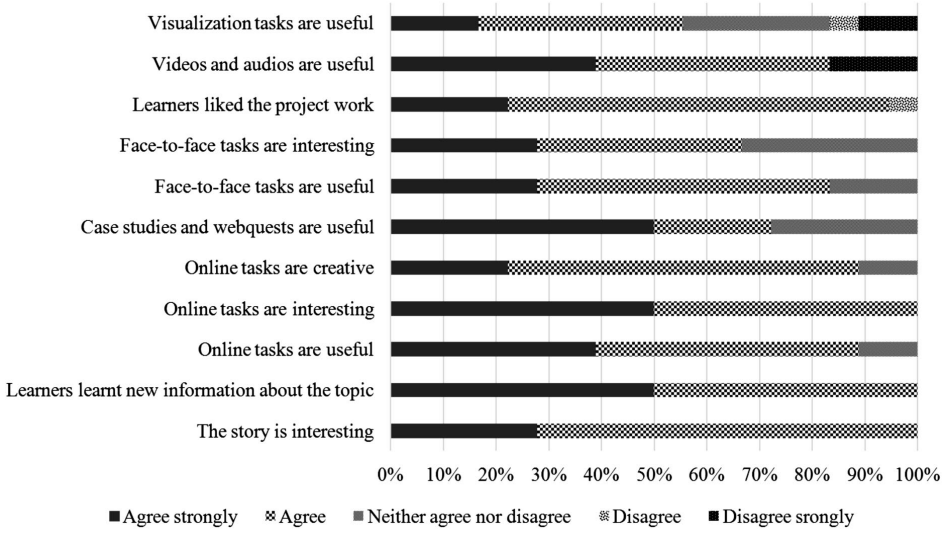


Figure 1. *Evaluation of the modules by teachers (%)*

In turn, the teachers do not find visualization tasks (M = 3.44; 4.00), videos, and audios (M = 3.88; Mo = 4.00) as useful as other tasks, although their evaluation is neutral – "neither agree nor disagree". They did not mention visualization tasks in their observation much, but the teachers admitted that some learners had found visualization tasks interesting – for example, Learner 8 from Croatia.

The third case scoring below 4.00 is for the variable "found face-to-face tasks interesting" (M = 3.94; Mo = 4.00), which might be explained by learners' readiness to interact with others. Significant differences were not discovered in terms of which of the modules were completed (Asymp. Sig. = 0.454), which means that the module evaluation is quite similar, and the results may be attributed to the whole course.

Skills development

The evaluation concerning the adult learners' skills developed ranges from 3.33 to 4.55 (Mo = 3.00–5.00), and the distribution is quite similar between the language skills and other twenty-first-century skills: M = 3.38–4.33 (Mo = 4.00 and 3.00) for language skills and M = 3.33–4.55 (Mo = 5.00 and 3.00) for other skills.

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Figure 2 summarizes the means concerning the summative (outcome) evaluation. Formative (process) evaluation was done during the whole teaching/learning period, and teachers took notes on each learner's progress.

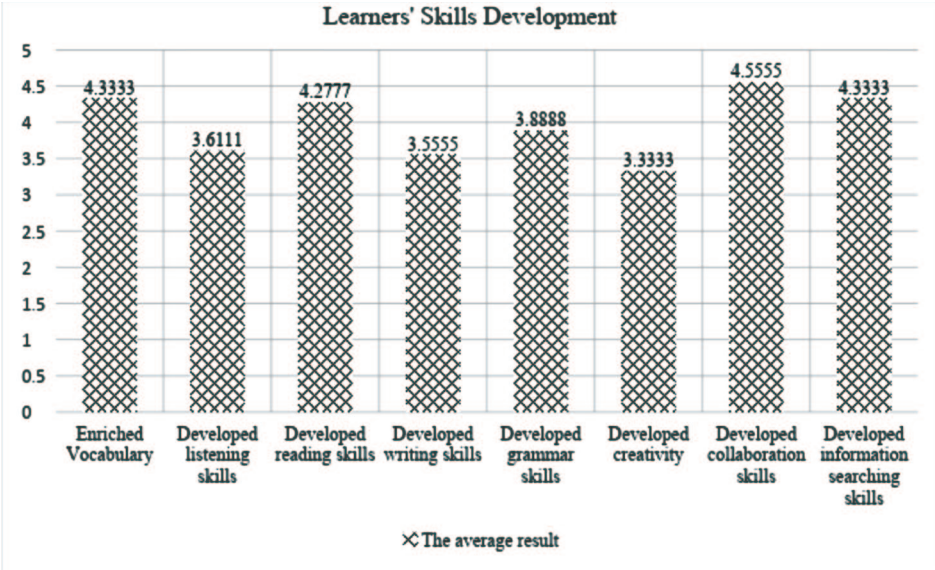


Figure 2. *Learners' skill development evaluated by the teachers (n = 5.00)*

The teachers recognized that the majority of learners had increased their vocabulary, a progress promoted by both online and face-to-face phases. Teachers' observations confirm this finding:

> She told me she had learned a lot of new words and liked the cultural topic. (Learner 1 from RO)
>
> She said the module had been fun. She particularly liked the crosswords and affirmed that she had learned a lot of new words. (Learner 6 from RO)
>
> The learner enjoyed acquiring new cultural information from this submodule. He learnt new vocabulary while performing the tasks. He especially liked the case study and the webquest and found them inspiring. (Learner 6 from PL).
>
> Reading skills were the second most developed language skill, but some of the reading tasks caused problems to learners as they "were too complicated" (Learner 3 from LV) and "longer than expected". (Learner 5 from RO)

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Although teachers considered that learners had developed their writing skills (e.g. learners 1, 3, and 4 from CZ, Learner 6 from LV, Learner 1 from HR), it is evident that they were not specifically fond of doing writing tasks. This may be attributed both to the tasks in which learners had to take notes and then discuss it with their groupmates (e.g. learners 1 and 2 from Sl, Learner 9 from HR) and to the content which they did not find interesting (e.g. Learner 1 from HR). The English teacher from Slovenia summarizes the possible reasons for this:

> The students didn't enjoy the writing task because they had to write about a specific event. For most of the students, writing a blog is not a problem as such; some of them have their own websites, writing blogs about different topics. The problem was the event – if they could have chosen a dance or music festival of their own, it would have been more interesting for them. Nevertheless, I think for adult learners this task will be very interesting – most of them are not familiar with online blogs, so this will be quite interesting, and specific instructions will help them to do the task.

Similar to the module evaluation, significant differences were not observed in terms of the module studied (Asymp. Sig. = 0.454). However, the findings showed significant differences between the countries regarding all skill development (Asymp. Sig. = 0.004–0.036), except reading skills (Asymp. Sig. = 0.181). What is more, Croatia and Poland demonstrated lower skill development than other partners, which may be explained with their target audiences for the course. Teachers' education level did not affect their decision since no significant differences were found therein (Asym. Sig. = 0.132–0.713).

The findings point to correlations between skill development and the platform evaluation and skill development and the task type. The strongest correlation has been observed between skill development and the interactivity of the platform and the platform structure and the information layout on the platform (see *Table 2*).

Table 2. *Correlations between skill development and the learning platform*

		Learners learnt some vocabulary on the topic	Learners developed their				
			listening skills	reading skills	writing skills	grammar skills	creativity while doing the module
Found the platform visually appealing	Correlation Coefficient	.065	.296	.151	.452	.477*	.096
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.797	.232	.550	.060	.045	.704
	N	18	18	18	18	18	18
Found the platform interactive, creative	Correlation Coefficient	.750**	.784**	.614**	.754**	.556*	.681**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.007	.000	.017	.002
	N	18	18	18	18	18	18

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		Learners learnt some vocabulary on the topic	Learners developed their				
			listening skills	reading skills	writing skills	grammar skills	creativity while doing the module
Found the platform well structured	Correlation Coefficient	.714**	.859**	.591**	.850**	.691**	.614**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000	.010	.000	.001	.007
	N	18	18	18	18	18	18
Found it easy to find the information	Correlation Coefficient	.709**	.812**	.545*	.825**	.633**	.523*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000	.019	.000	.005a	.026
	N	18	18	18	18	18	18

Notes: Strong correlations are marked in dark grey and the moderate ones in light grey.
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Strong and moderate correlations were found also considering skill development and the tasks. However, more correlations were found regarding the development of learners' creativity than English language skills. The following cases showed strong positive correlations: 1) the use of case studies and webquests and the development of learners' creativity ($r_s = 0.819$, Sig. 2-tailed = 0.000); 2) the usefulness of face-to-face tasks and the development of learners' creativity ($r_s = 0.757$, Sig. 2-tailed = 0.000); 3) the degree to which face-to-face tasks were interesting and the development of learners' creativity ($r_s = 0.723$, Sig. 2-tailed = 0.001). Furthermore, moderate positive correlations were found between: 1) the usefulness of on-line tasks and the development of learners' creativity ($r_s = 0.562$, Sig. 2-tailed = 0.015); 2) the creativity of on-line tasks and the development of learners' creativity ($r_s = 0.557$, Sig. 2-tailed = 0.016); 3) the usefulness of audio and video tasks and the development of learners' creativity ($r_s = 0.627$, Sig. 2-tailed = 0.005).

As to the development of language skills, correlations were found between the development of all language skills and vocabulary acquisition and between the development of language skills and the usefulness and creativity of online tasks, wherein all of them showed moderate correlations ($r_s = 0.491$–0.628, Sig. 2-tailed = 0.0009–0.048), but the development of listening and writing skills showed strong correlations ($r_s = 0.837$, Sig. 2-tailed = 0.000 and $r_s = 0.876$, Sig. 2-tailed = 0.000 respectively), which proves the claim that online tasks "can help students to improve their key language skills, particularly the skills of listening, reading, and writing" (Klimova–Kacetl 2015).

The conducted Cronbach's alpha validity and reliability analysis shows a good internal consistency between the issues under investigation and a very high validity ($\alpha = 0.939$) as well as very high data reliability ($s = 0.931$–0.942).

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Discussion

As it is evident from the research findings, the given blended-learning course has contributed to the development of learners' language and digital skills. Learners liked the learning platform and the tasks, and they found that "it's a good way to learn and train IT skills" (Learner 1 from Sl) and develop "collaboration and information searching skills" (Learner 1 from LV). Similar results were obtained in a study conducted in Russia (Buran–Evseeva 2015), where a survey of 100 teachers and 550 students indicated advantages of blended learning contributing to the development of learners' language competence and relevant twenty-first-century skills such as students' online research skills, reading, writing, and listening skills, as well as increased students' motivation.

Although the research findings showed the learners' skill development, overall, teachers' observations pointed to a greater development in learners' reading skills and vocabulary enrichment than in their writing and listening skills. This partly coincides with the previous research in the field, which – similarly to the current research – observed the enrichment of learners' vocabulary (Lai–Li 2011, Lungu 2013) and the development of learners' reading skills (Klimova–Kacetl 2015), but it also pointed to a considerable development of learners' writing skills (Lai–Li 2011, Klimova–Kacetl 2015, Miyazoe–Anderson 2012), whereas in the current research the development of writing skills was observed for part of the learners only. The approach of the "objective-focused online writing model" comprising forums for discussion, blogs for reflection, and wikis for collaboration accompanied with online writing tasks have facilitated the language acquisition of English learners in Japan (Miyazoe–Anderson 2012: 151). Such an approach could also be integrated in the current course to make it more creative and bring it closer to the younger generation's learning patterns.

Games and interactivity are important teaching/learning elements to make learning more attractive and playful. The research conducted in Hungary pointed to students' preference of doing text comprehension exercises, creative and playful tasks such as word puzzles and others (Sántha-Malomsoki–Sántha 2019). Similarly, the current research also showed that learners were especially interested in doing quizzes and word puzzles.

Finally, the findings confirm the opinion expressed by several scholars (Moser–Wei–Btenner 2021; Meskill–Anthony 2015) that the learning system is very important in attaining learning outcomes, and therefore "it is appropriate to present information and methodological support as a system composed of three subsystems: 1) content; 2) software; 3) methodology" (Matukhin–Zhitkova 2015: 185). This was evident both from the evaluation of the learning platform as well as from learners' observations mentioned above. Moreover, teachers play a significant role in providing consultancy on the content, task requirements, and

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technological issues. As emphasized by Fandiño and Velandia (2020), efficient learners' guidance provided by teachers makes the language learning process more successful and increases learners' motivation to learn English online.

Conclusions

In the current education scenario worldwide, including adult learning, when traditional face-to-face learning is restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, online and blended learning formats have become especially significant. In such a context, blended learning enables adapting to these restrictions, and the face-to-face stage is implemented on an online environment. Furthermore, communication contexts are changing. Much of the communication is transferred to an online environment, which requires highly developed language competences and digital skills.

Considering this, the current course may be a viable solution since language learning is embedded in a cultural context, and, while obtaining new information on European cultural heritage, learners develop their English language skills, intercultural competence, information searching skills, and collaboration. Depending on the learning outcomes envisaged by the English language syllabus as well as the target audience, the given course may be used for 1) creating a topical syllabus, which could be especially useful for students of cultural education institutions or curricula in the field of arts and culture or 2) selected course modules or submodules may be integrated in the existing institutional English language syllabus. However, it has to be emphasized that in both options students have to do all the submodule – from introduction to the end. Concerning non-formal adult education, language course organizers may use the syllabus worked out by the project team, which is uploaded on the learning platform at: http://e-culture.eu/.

The research findings showed the development of learners' English language competence, and most of the learners enjoyed the course; consequently, it may be used for developing adult learners' English language skills. However, some improvements concerning listening and writing tasks should be made to ensure their greater development. Targeted writing tasks aimed at the learners' specific needs may be applied therein.

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