

CREATING A CULTURE-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING COURSE FOR DEVELOPING ADULT LEARNERS' 21ST CENTURY SKILLS

INETA LUKA

Turība University

Graudu 68, Rīga LV-1058, Latvia

E-mail address: Ineta@turiba.lv

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4706-1663>

ABSTRACT

Aim. The aim of the study is to research ways of developing adult learners' 21st century skills in a culture-based language learning course applying innovative teaching/learning tools and methodologies considering adult learners' specific needs and special educational treatment required to overcome learning barriers.

Methods. Data collection methods include teachers' accounts in the form of reflective essays on their pedagogical experience collected from 14 teachers. For data analysis and interpretation constant comparative method to elicit themes/categories and create construct mapping to make connections between ideas and themes has been used.

Results and conclusion. An on-line learning course for adult learners, including blended-learning, must be based on classic adult learning principles considering the given socio-cultural context, learners' backgrounds, needs, motivation, learning styles and strategies. The adult learners' skills developed and cultural knowledge increased will help them in enriching their knowledge and competences, thus leading to higher upskilling and higher employability and quality, as well as becoming true lifelong learners.

Research restrictions. The current paper deals with the analysis of the first stage of the research – teachers' feedback and course creation. The second stage comprising observation and feedback obtained during the course piloting eliciting learners' and teachers' data will be analysed in a later article.

Practical application. The research findings are useful in selecting suitable methodologies and approaches for language learning courses for adult learners, possibly for other courses as well.

Originality/Cognitive value. The current research enables understanding adult learning context and specifics to secure special educational treatment required to overcome learning barriers and develop adult learners' 21st century skills in a culture-based blended-learning course.

Key words: adult teaching/learning, language competence, 21st century skills, blended-learning



INTRODUCTION

Globalisation has created new challenges and opportunities for economies and society in general. “Societies are changing rapidly and profoundly” (OECD, 2018, p. 3) and, therefore, to survive and prosper in the current context and in the unknown future a broad range of new skills and competences, often addressed as 21st century skills, are required.

Previous research shows that various terminologies have been used to describe them: 21st century skills (enGauge 21st century skills, 2003), survival skills (Wagner, 2008), employability skills (Tesone, & Ricci, 2006), future skills for employability (CEDEFOP, 2016), future competences 3.0 for the unknown future (Mulder, 2016). In-depth analysis reveals similarities between the components mentioned. Namely, enGauge project emphasises the following skills clusters: digital-age literacy, inventive thinking, effective communication and high productivity (enGauge 21st century skills, 2003), which incorporate the skills that have also been included in other frameworks. Wagner (2008) highlights such survival skills as critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration across networks and leading by influence, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurship, effective oral and written communication, accessing and analysing information, curiosity and imagination. Tesone and Ricci (2006) among other skills point to the significance of teamworking, effective communication skills, flexibility, ability to make creative decisions. Similarly, Mulder (2016) stresses argumentative reasoning, complex problem solving, creativity, entrepreneurship, mindfulness, etc. He perceives competence as integrated capabilities consisting of knowledge, skills, and attitude clusters needed in a certain profession or situation to ensure sustainable effective performance, including problem-solving, innovation and creating transformation. Mulder’s framework consists of five mutually connected competence groups: personal-professional competence, self-management and career competence, social-professional competence, disciplinary and interdisciplinary competence, integrative learning competence. Each of them includes at least nine essential skills or competences, in total sixty skills and competences.

Currently, the new strategic framework “OECD Education 2030” defines the following 21st century skills groups: cognitive and meta-cognitive skills (problem solving, creativity, critical thinking, analytical skills, learning, etc.), social and emotional skills (empathy, communication, collaboration, initiative taking, etc.), physical and practical skills (kinaesthetic ability and ability to use tools, e.g. ICT, etc.). It also emphasises a significant component of the learning framework – attitudes and values (motivation, trust, respect for diversity, self-confidence, responsibility, etc.) to be observed at personal, local, societal and global levels (OECD, 2018).

Comparing all the above-mentioned frameworks, in this research special attention is paid to language skills, communication skills, collaboration, teamworking, problem-solving, creativity, critical thinking, flexibility, respect for diversity and willingness to learn (learning-to-learn) as essential 21st century

skills required for sustainable and inclusive society, personal fulfilment and mindfulness.

The purpose of this study is to research ways of developing adult learners' 21st century skills in a culture-based language learning course applying innovative teaching/learning tools and methodologies considering adult learners' specific needs and special educational treatment required to overcome learning barriers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical Framework is formed by adult learning and language teaching/learning theories.

In this research the term "adult" is used to denote learners after compulsory learning, both formal and informal. It also refers to students acquiring post-secondary and tertiary education.

Characteristics of adult learners are essential to organise a learning process. First, adult learners have a "versatile spectrum of experiences, which determines the intellectual, motivational, volitional, and social dispositions of a learner" (Kraus, 2016, p. 106) and which they bring to the classroom. This means that they have certain, possibly higher, expectations and they are experienced learners. Their experience may also be beneficial, as a teacher may use it in eliciting real-life examples, solving problem-based tasks which are crucial to develop learners' 21st century skills, such as cognitive and meta-cognitive skills. Secondly, learning is also influenced by the socio-cultural context (Pätzold, 2011), including cultural differences and values (Hofstede, 1986) and differences among generations (Baby Boomers, X, Y, Z generations) (Rothwell, 2008; Williams, 2018). Depending on the learning context and the teacher, this may be an advantage or a disadvantage. Intergenerational learning is among the main advantages, whereas the negative aspects are related to emotional issues, such as, young teachers may be worried that adult learners may not always take them seriously or sometimes even ignore them.

Considering the above-mentioned, *Constructivist Learning theories* (the focus on how learners internalise what they have learnt), *Anchored Instruction* (learning experience centred on a problem-solving activity to make the learning event action oriented), *Functional Context theory* (the learning content connected with learners' work) are essential in adult learning (Rothwell, 2008). Knowledge acquisition through active experiencing and reflection applying problem-centred and task-centred approaches helps solving problems encountered in the future (Aubrey, & Riley, 2016; Knowles, 1984; Dewey, 1938). Furthermore, reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, i.e., evaluating a situation and making changes required, is typical to experienced learners (Schön, 1983; 1987).

These premises are also used in language teaching/learning as language is best acquired in social interaction (Vygotsky, 1986; Widdowson, 1978) through

experimentation based on previous learning experience, observing and reflecting, which corresponds to Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb, 1984).

CONTEXT

The current research has been conducted within the framework of the Erasmus+ project "Cultural knowledge and language competences as a means to develop 21st century skills" conducted in six EU countries Croatia, Latvia, Slovenia, Romania, Poland and the Czech Republic (Project No.2018-1-HR-01-KA204-047430; 2018-2020). The aim of the project is to develop adult learners' relevant 21st century skills (problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, innovation, initiative, digital skills, etc.), language and intercultural competences and foster learners' knowledge of the rich European cultural heritage and its values by applying innovative learning approaches and materials consequently increasing learners' education level and bringing them closer to their cultural heritage, history and the common European values, enhancing their overall development and employability. The target audience is adult learners, including those with certain barriers to learning (geographic, economic, cultural, social, educational).

Adult learners are provided with a targeted blended-learning language course created applying CLIL methodology, the content of which is related with the rich intangible European cultural heritage presented in the form of a story, applying innovative methodologies and tools (webquests, case studies, vialogues, design thinking tools, interactive games, etc.) increasing learners' cultural knowledge and developing relevant 21st century key skills (collaboration, communication, initiative, creativity, analytical reasoning, problem solving, etc.) and improving learners' language competence. This story is a uniting component connecting all the tasks, which is in line both with *constructivist learning* and *anchored instruction* theories mentioned above.

Blended-learning refers to a language course which combines face-to-face classroom components with an appropriate use of technology (Sharma, & Barrett, 2007) comprising 30-79% online teaching/learning (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007). The term 'technology' covers a wide range of recent technologies – the Internet, CD-ROMs and interactive whiteboards. It also includes the use of computers as a means of communication, such as chat and e-mail, and electronic environments – virtual learning environments, blogs and wikis, which enable teachers to enrich their courses (Sharma, & Barrett, 2007). It has to be emphasised that this pedagogy-driven approach combining social interaction with technology and pedagogy (Wang, 2008) is essential for language teaching/learning as language is learnt in practice, in communication. Pedagogical design makes learning meaningful, authentic and relevant to learners which is in line with the above-mentioned *constructivist learning* and *functional context* theories. Social design refers to corresponding learning activities – group work, project work, collaboration among learners using synchronic and asyn-

chronic communication possibilities (chats and forums). Technological design helps by securing interaction which is done with the help of an adequate interactive interface.

According to Laborda (2011), in language learning adult learners' previous experience is significant in selecting learning materials and the materials should be relevant to adult learners' professional backgrounds, therefore listening activities, webquests, case studies, professional websites are useful to make the tasks personally meaningful to them.

The term 'CLIL' (content and language integrated learning) was created by David Marsh from University of Jyväskylä, Finland in 1994. CLIL refers to situations where subjects, or parts of subjects, are taught through a foreign language with dual-focused aims, namely the learning of content and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language (Marsh, 1994). CLIL methodology is associated with 4 Cs: content, communication, cognition and culture (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010) which provide opportunities to study content through different perspectives, increase learners' intercultural knowledge and understanding, and develop language competence. As mentioned above, in the current context, the course is created based on the rich European cultural heritage in a form of a story that is put into a certain learning situation and learners follow it step-by-step and acquire the knowledge and develop language competences and 21st century skills. In order to design the course - create suitable teaching/learning materials, choose appropriate teaching/learning methods and approaches that would best suit the target groups (adult learners), teachers' pedagogical experience has been researched.

METHODS

The current research applies the interpretivism *paradigm*, involving ideographic methodology and 'it aims to describe and understand what is unique and distinctive about a particular context, case or individual' (Coe, 2017, p. 10). Naturalistic research design has been selected as it is 'primarily based on participant observation and informal interviewing' (Walker, 2017, p. 78) thus enabling to reveal reflection on one's teaching/learning.

Research sample comprises 14 teachers from the six project countries teaching adult learners. In a later stage, these teachers were involved in the course piloting. Teachers' accounts - a data collection tool applied to collect data using words (Thomas, 2009) - were taken prior the course piloting. The sample profile: teaching experience 4-27 years, twelve language teachers and three informants also teaching other disciplines (pedagogy, ICT, geography, logistics).

Research methods used: 1) data collection - teachers' accounts in the form of reflective essays wherein they reflected on greatest challenges faced when teaching adult learners, adult learners' learning styles, strategies and preferences, the way how they organise pedagogical process, about cultural influences, etc.; 2) data analysis and interpretation - constant comparative method - the

basic analytic method of interpretivism used for analysing qualitative data to elicit themes or categories (Thomas, 2009), followed by construct mapping to make connections between ideas and themes.

Research period: November 2018 – January 2019.

Research question: What methods and methodologies could enhance the development of adult learners' 21st century skills in a culture-based blended-learning language course and how to use them in the course creation and implementation?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of teachers' accounts – reflections on their pedagogical experience resulted in eliciting four main categories: 1) challenges working with adult learners, 2) adult learning styles and strategies, 3) organisation of pedagogical process, 4) cultural influence on adult learning. Based on them construct mapping was created.

For the first category *Challenges working with adult learners* the following constructs were derived: group compositions (3), motivation (9), language learning (3), competing interests (4), expectations (4), personal traits (4), content (4), age factor (4) (see Fig. 1).

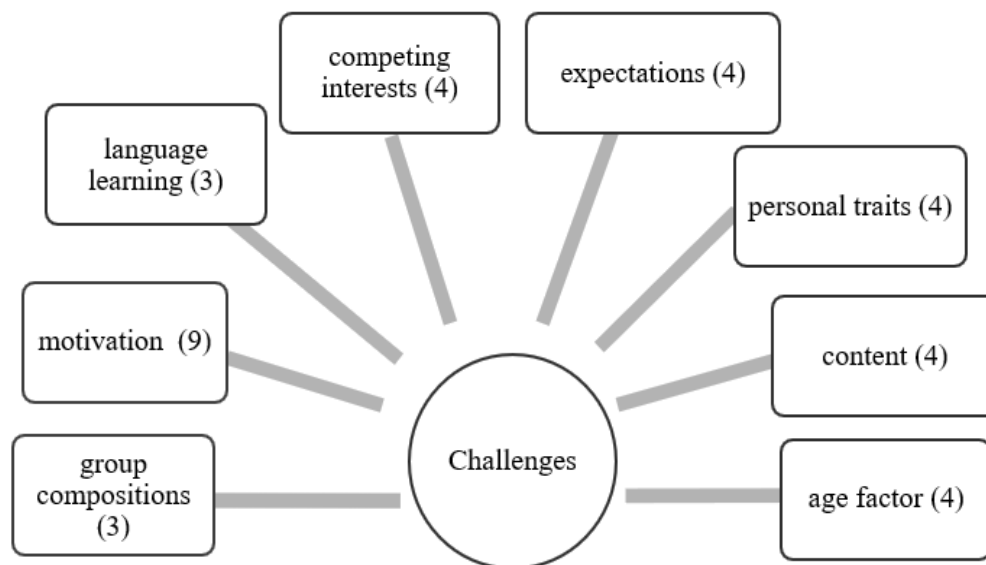


Figure 1.

Challenges working with adult learners

Source: created by the author based on the teachers' accounts

One of the greatest challenges to cope with is *group compositions*. Teachers pointed to “mixed level language groups” they have to deal with, also “various age structure in a group”. Adult learning definitely requires “individual attitude” to each learner which is in line with the core assumptions of andragogy that emphasise cooperation between teacher and learner wherein, as indicated

by Gehtmane-Hofmane (2018, p. 81), teacher shall “establish a climate for learning, together with learner identify learning needs” and strive to attain the learning goal.

Another challenge is *motivation*. The teachers have to “find the best option in teaching approach,” because very often adult learners are “motivated at the beginning” of the course, but they tend to “give up learning when facing obstacles.” “The time factor” significantly impacts the learning result. Although “most of them are practical and goal-oriented”, adult learners often have problems in “meeting deadlines,” and sometimes they “might lack confidence,” which again stresses the necessity for “individual help required.” These accounts coincide with the results gained in the research of Avota (2017, p. 34) wherein she indicates that “the main hindering factor affecting successful distance learning is the lack of time and self-motivation.” However, the teachers find that “extrinsic motivation dominates,” which is in contrast with the results gained in the research in 2018 wherein it is stressed that adults predominantly have internal motivation to learn, such as better quality of life, recognition, self-confidence (Katalnikova, 2018). It has to be stressed that “in practice formation of intrinsic motivation is stipulated by external factors” (Alksne, 2016, p. 30). Possible promotion, better employability possibilities are just some of them.

The challenges associated with *language learning* are connected with “lots of resources learning takes” and “the adults’ wish for a quick result” which might stem from the situation that “sometimes adult learners are too overconfident.” These challenges are even strengthened by the *competing interests* of adult learners (Rogers, 1996). The competing interests mean that adults have various duties to cope with at the same time. “They are usually busy” both at “families and work,” and often they are “working students who miss classes.” Consequently, there is “insufficient preparation for classes and tests” which impacts their learning outcomes.

Another challenge is connected with adult learners’ *expectations*, which might be contradictory ones in the group. The teachers emphasise that adults “want to learn very fast” and “become fluent in a short time”. This partly coincides with the challenge *motivation* mentioned above wherein it was stressed that adult learners give up learning fast if they do not see immediate results. Their expectations stem from ‘different educational backgrounds and learning experiences’. According to Bojare and Skrinda (2016, p. 123) “the development of a person’s learning experience and competence, the process of learning foreign languages and the learning environment make a holistic system” which promotes personality development.

Another challenge while working with adult learners is their *personal traits*, which were described with the following quotations “very sensitive,” “it takes longer to understand the material,” “getting bored easily,” “very demanding and inflexible regarding the lesson.” This again points to adult learners’ diversity the teachers have to cope with. This challenge is made more complicated by challenges expressed by *the age factor*. The teachers’ accounts were directed in two ways: 1) the younger teachers found it prob-

lematic to manage balanced “relationship between teacher and learner” and the problem was caused by “teacher being younger than learners”, it was even mentioned that “seniors lack discipline;” 2) some teachers found it problematic to “employ the gadgets young adults use.” Previous research (Bojare, & Skrinda, 2016) shows that the answer to these challenges is in observing holistic pedagogy principles to facilitate learners’ experience and use it to contribute to the learning goals.

Last but not the least, *content* is another challenge category. Teachers mentioned the following challenges: “finding up-to-date and relevant material,” “making the course interesting for all ages,” “material of adequate level of difficulty” and “diverse topics.” “Holistic orientation, awareness of context and authentic practice” (Brizga, 2016, p. 27) are useful therein.

To sum up, sustaining learners’ motivation is a challenge. In mixed level language groups, various ages require individual attitude to sustain the existing extrinsic motivation and develop the intrinsic one in the given time period. Additional preventing factors are family and work commitments. Relevant material, adequate level of difficulty and holistic approach to teaching/learning are important drivers of success therein.

The constructs for the second category: preferences (9), strategies applied (13), learning styles (13) are summarised in Fig. 2.

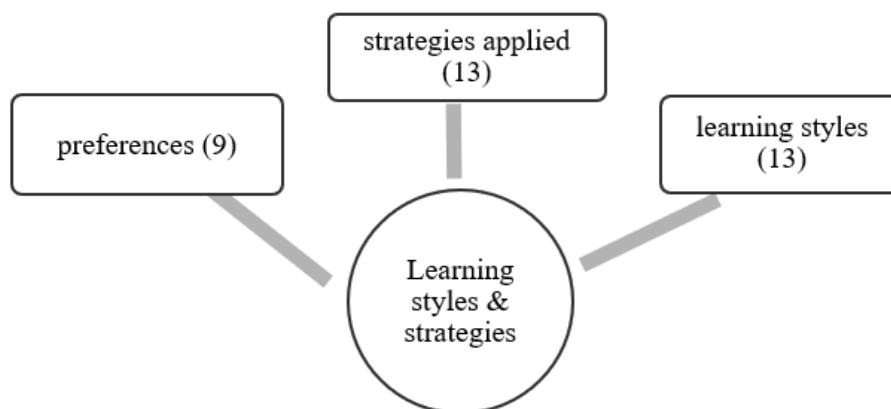


Figure 2. Adult learning styles and strategies

Source: created by the author based on the teachers’ accounts

Previous research on adult learning styles have resulted in defining adult learning types (Gardner, 1983; Nunan, 1991; Bimmel, & Rampillon, 2000). The most popular theory in adult learning is Kolb’s Experiential Learning (Kolb, 1984) wherein the following learning styles have been defined: diverging (concrete, reflective), assimilating (abstract, reflective), converging (abstract, active) and accommodating (concrete, active). It has to be added that various combinations exist as learners may have certain traits of several types of learning. Another popular classification concerning foreign language learning has been offered by Long (2002) who classified adult learners into target-oriented (learners’ learning needs stem from a definite need), activity-oriented (adults get

involved in the action because of the activity itself, prefer learning forms based on mutual relationship) and learning-oriented (education is adults' way of life, they learn for the sake of learning). Naturally, learners' preferences differ and in a group there are learners preferring diverse learning styles which means that they apply different learning strategies to get to their aim. This makes the adult learning context more complicated than the one of compulsory education at school.

The teachers mentioned the following *adult learning styles and strategies*:

- *Preferences*: "different pace," "prefer other ways," "unwilling to do standard tasks," "not willing to express their opinion," "more relaxed learning environment," "not used to reading longer texts," "seniors want to control their learning process," "do not like playing games and are opposed to listening," "protest against physical exercises;"
- *Learning strategies applied*: "traditional ways," "logical grammar rules," "some like games more than teenagers," "prefer a bit more creative tasks," "prefer interactive and speaking tasks," "a lot of speaking exercises," "older adults like taking notes, employ translations and they need exact explanations and instructions," "rote learning techniques," "most are not aware of meaningful learning techniques - concept mapping, memorising techniques," "groupwork and pair work;"
- *Learning styles*: "like individual work vs. groupwork or pair work," "find speaking and listening tasks too difficult," "synthetic and creative thinking," "improvisation," "traditional style," "problem-solving," "interactive learning," "younger adults require more autonomy," "usually autonomous learners," "prefer individualism," "have learnt a language from cartoons, video games, chatrooms," "seniors definitely prefer to be active rather than passive," "not too many steps in a task."

This is the most overlapping construct. Learners' learning styles determine their learning strategies. The impact of different pace, and unwillingness to do standard tasks have been observed. Lots of contradiction among selecting strategies has been discovered. It may be concluded that despite the theory analysed (Vygotsky, 1986; Widdowson, 1978; Long, 2002) and the many keywords from the teachers' accounts mentioned above, individualism prevails in adult learning, which on the one hand may result in adults preferring to do online learning tasks, but on the other hand it may prevent them from participating in the target course as language learning includes lots of interaction and collaboration both face-to-face and in the virtual learning environment. What is more, to suit the senior learner needs, very precise and clear task explanations are required.

The constructs for the third category (see Fig. 3): support required (9), teacher's learning (2), teaching process (7), teaching strategies (6), tasks used (11) have direct and indirect impact on the organisation of pedagogical process.

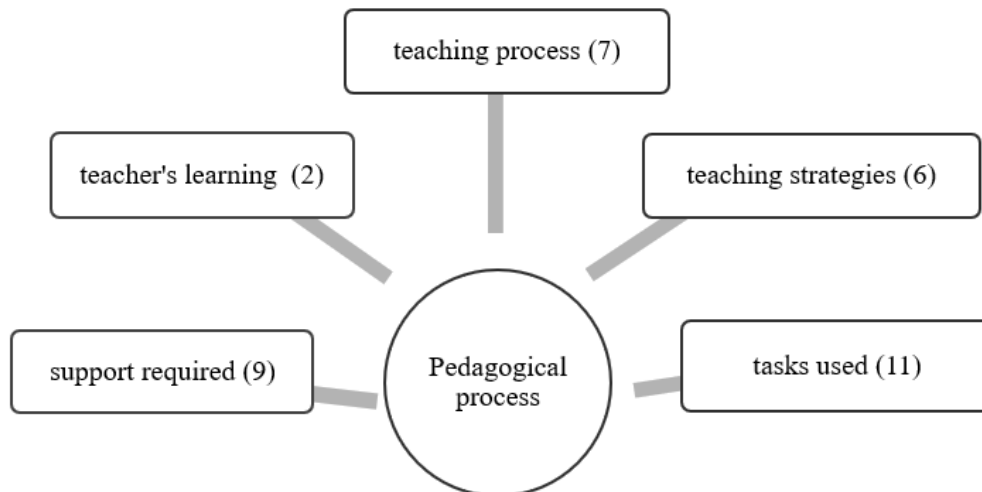


Figure 3. Organisation of pedagogical process

Source: created by the author based on the teachers' accounts

Organisation of pedagogical process is paramount. Although adult learning “is based on adults’ own initiative and responsibility has been defined in several ways: self-directed learning, self-planned studying, self-studying, independent studies, autonomous studying, autodidactics as well as open learning” (Liepa, & Špona, 2012, p. 340), they still require *pedagogical support*. Since the course created is a blended-learning course, “complete online support shall be provided” which would also ensure “communication between teacher and students.” Teachers’ pedagogical experience shows that “elderly learners need more technical support in online learning” and very clear explanations have to be provided. It is even suggested “to prepare some explanatory material in advance” which may include “different teaching aids – audio, visual, tactile.” What is more, “individual conversations” are crucial to reach the learning outcomes. As emphasised by Bojāre (2014, p. 293) “interaction between the learner and virtual environment during social process of learning” fosters the acquisition of the learning outcomes. Teachers repeatedly stress the importance of having small groups of learners.

Learning is a mutual process; therefore, teachers are benefitting from adult learners’ experience as well. At the same time teachers have to be ready to learn. *Teacher’s learning* is essential to be ready to use “theories that complement the materials available” as well as learners expect “good examples” that are meaningful and suit their practical language learning needs. Teacher’s learning concerns all the stages of pedagogical process – from needs analysis to content and methodologies, employing cooperation among learners, including intergenerational learning, especially in interactive and culture-based tasks.

Teaching process, teaching strategies and tasks used are interrelated categories. According to teachers’ accounts, “tasks should vary and not to take much time,” they should “not be too long,” but at the same time it is necessary to include “versatile tasks” to sustain learners’ motivation. The research findings

approve theoretical premises derived from *constructivist learning theories, anchored instruction* and *functional context theory* (Rothwell, 2008) on participation, cooperative learning, and giving a focus to each learning situation to enhance elderly adult learners' concentration abilities. From the teachers' accounts it is suggested to use "quizzes as a learning tool," "apply webquests" which foster learners' creativity, problem-solving and digital skills as learners have to search on-line for some useful material in solving the immediate problem. Although the scope of on-line and face-to-face proportion in blended-learning course may vary, the prevailing part still is the online one, it is suggested to pay more attention to "face-to-face class learning and groupwork," which makes learners feel more personally involved. Some teachers suggested to "avoid using too many games," others recommended "reading authentic texts on cultures," but all teachers recognise the necessity of using "diverse tasks" which are especially important in developing learners' 21st century skills, such as creativity, collaboration, initiative, and others.

The other two constructs of *pedagogical process* employ the tools - tasks created, and vice versa - the tasks have to be created based on the cognitions of qualitative, efficient *teaching process*, which starts with a "needs analysis" that is in line with adult learning theories. The other expressions characterising this construct are: "versatile tasks to involve all learners and give a chance to speak," "a range of different activities to suit everyone's learning style" (mentioned by three teachers), "organise cooperation among learners of different generations - intergenerational learning, intergenerational dialogue in groupwork/pair work" (mentioned by two teachers), "precise requirements" and "balance between more traditional language learning strategies and gadget-based."

Concerning *teaching strategies*, teachers mentioned traditional strategies for language teaching - "interactive and competitive games," "match pairs/groups of students with similar learning style or language level," "mixing different types of exercises" as well as "often changing activities." The only difference concerned the length of the tasks and instructions as it was suggested "avoiding exercises which contain numerous steps or last longer than 15-20 minutes" and "repeating instructions in the mother tongue," which is an arguable question.

To sum up, pedagogical process is a managed process and it depends on teacher's pedagogical mastery as well as the target group of learners and institutional context.

The constructs for the fourth category (see Fig. 4): external influences (8), learners' interests (2), cultural backgrounds (2), generational differences (2), cultural issues (5) indicate that culture influences learning.

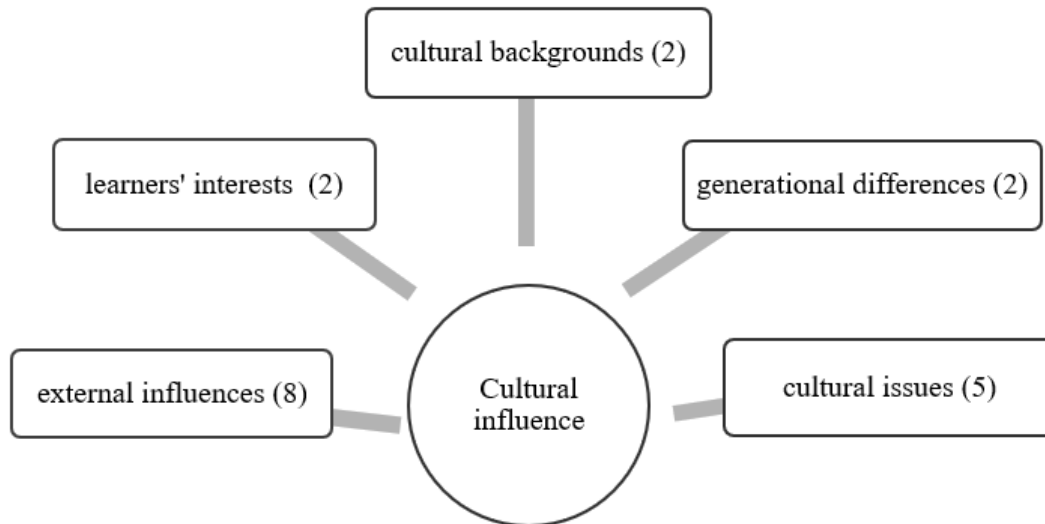


Figure 4. Cultural influence on adult learning

Source: created by the author based on the teachers' accounts

Learning has an emotional and cognitive dimension and it always occurs in a socio-cultural context (Pätzold, 2011). "Although learning may be seen as an individual process of balancing emotional and cognitive aspects, it is always in some way related to the environment" (Illeris, 2004, p. 95). These theoretical premises are confirmed by the data derived from teachers' accounts wherein *cultural backgrounds*, *cultural issues* and *generational differences* are highlighted. The teachers indicate that "learning depends on the culture of organization" and, of course, learners themselves play a significant role therein. Concerning *learners' interests*, adult learners usually demonstrate "interest in foreign cultures and lifestyles" which may be explained by their experience gained while travelling and/or meeting people of different countries and cultures. The teacher working with senior adult learners has observed that "seniors are interested in foreign cultures." This is also strengthened by the fact that "older generations have better knowledge of traditions and customs" which may be an additional benefit to the course when engaging learners in "intergenerational dialogues on cultures." According to the teachers, "social media, globalisation, cultural background, different generations, learners' interest should be employed in intergenerational dialogues."

Although in the previously analysed categories it was stressed that senior adults require more precise requirements, learners' cultural background also has to be taken into an account when creating the guidelines. The teachers' accounts revealed that students having different cultural backgrounds "frequently require more detailed and repeated explanations" which is explained by learners' previous language learning experience in formal education institutions. What is more, when working in a multicultural group observing pedagogical ethos is crucial. Being asked how they overcome different cultural barriers and escape problem situa-

tions, the teachers reflect on their best practice. They suggest “being considerate when sensitive issues come up in discussions,” “explaining problems using learners’ own cultures and through this aspect insert realities of other cultures,” “using tasks containing much cultural background,” practicing “dialogues between representatives from various cultures” and “avoiding any controversial or emotional topics.”

Finally, *external influences*, such as “Internet, social media, TV channels, globalisation, cultural environment, cultural background” have to be mentioned. Although it might seem that young adults are more influenced by these external influences, nowadays the age factor does not have such a significant impact. However, the place of residence may influence learners’ learning styles and success. For example, “adult people from rural areas are less active” and they may require more pedagogical support, especially in managing their interaction with other learners.

To sum up, the fourth category *cultural influence on adult learning* is linked with all others. The second category *adult learning styles and strategies* and the third category *organisation of pedagogical process* are close and influence each other.

To conclude, the author of the article agrees with the cognitions of a previously conducted research on adult learners’ language learning by Liepa and Špona (2012, p. 340) “that adult learning is a targeted process based on former knowledge and learning experience, self-directed learning, adults’ impact on the study process, pre-conditioned and meaningful, reachable goal learning and creation/ setting of an appropriate study situation. Adults who are pursuing study have to be well-aware why they pursue it, what they have to pursue and how they have to pursue it. Adult’s learning is self-directed self-studying and autonomous.” Thus, the current culture-based blended-learning course is suitable in developing adult learners’ language competence and cultural knowledge as well as enhancing their 21st century skills as it corresponds to the adult learner specifics.

As argued by Bond (2011, p. 204), ‘The elements of good teaching remain the same regardless of the course format. Good instruction requires the use of methods that capture learners’ attention, provoke further study, elicit original thoughts, and facilitate problem solving within a particular context’.

Considering these premises and the findings from the teachers’ accounts on adult learning specifics, the course construct has been made (see Fig. 5) which reflects essential 21st century skills and corresponding language tasks and teaching/learning tools to enhance the development of these skills.

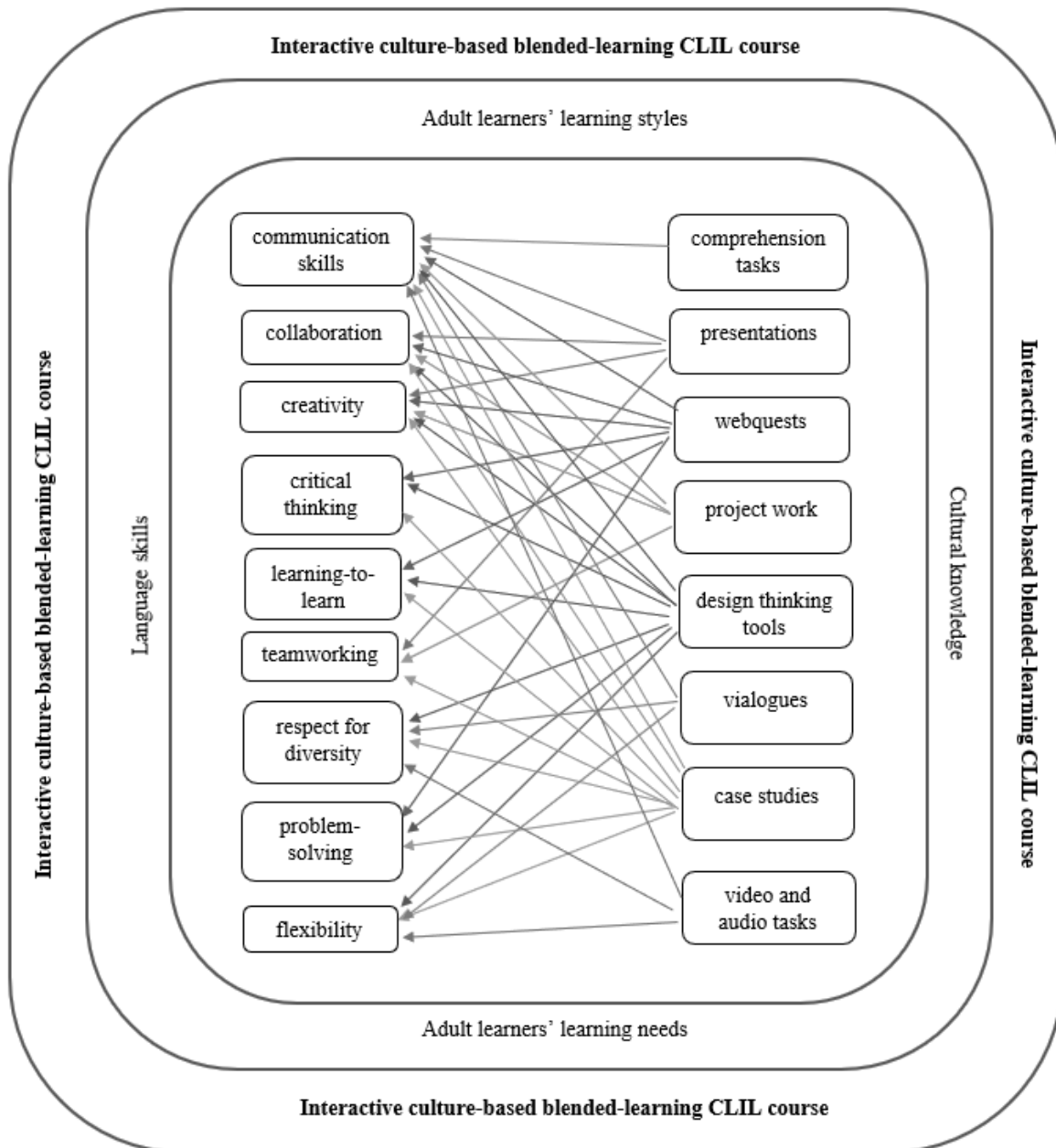


Figure 5. Course construct

Source: created by the author based on the research findings

Adult learners are provided an opportunity to develop their 21st century skills in the given interactive culture-based blended-learning CLIL course that is based on the explored adult learners' learning needs and considering their learning styles. As it may be seen from *Fig. 5*, the following 21st century skills are enhanced: communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, learning-to-learn, teamworking, respect for diversity, problem-solving and flexibility. Since the course is created as a CLIL course, alongside with the development of target language skills learners acquire certain cultural knowledge incorporated into each module. The skills development occurs applying both traditional and innovative teaching/learning tools, thus ensuring that learners are exposed to

various learning situations and tools, which is in line with the above-analysed teachers' accounts that stressed versatility and diversity.

Comprehension tasks are an inseparable part of any on-line, also blended-learning, course. They give learners an opportunity to check their skills acquired and elicit failures so that they can make improvements.

Presentations, a standard tool applied in any study course to present information found, are useful in developing learners' communication skills, collaboration, creativity and teamworking, because presentations often conclude a previous project work, they are an output of a groupwork or pair work activity.

A webquest is a research activity, usually done in pairs or in small groups, in which learners collect information on the subject using Internet resources (Laborda, 2009; Sharma, & Barrett, 2007). In the centre is a problem that learners may face in their professional life or studies, and as the problem is personally meaningful and significant to them, they develop a wide spectrum of skills: communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, learning-to-learn and problem-solving. Webquests comply with the constructivist learning premises.

Project work may be done in class or as a field work when learners are requested to leave their ordinary learning environment – the language classroom or the virtual learning platform, and collect definite information in a real setting, such as, a museum, church, and restaurant or participate in some traditional rituals and ceremonies, festivals, etc. to experience feelings by themselves. It is found useful in developing learners' communication skills, collaboration, creativity, teamworking.

Design thinking tools are not so commonly used in traditional courses, but in the current course they are an inseparable component of each module. Considering teachers' accounts on adult learners' learning styles and preferences, design thinking tasks are useful to develop most of the 21st century skills. According to the previous research (Dorst, 2011; Dolak, Uebernickel, & Brenner, 2013), design thinking comprises collaboration in order to solve the problems by finding and processing information taking into consideration the real world, people's experience and feedback and applying creativity, critical thinking and communication. Other researchers (Johansson, & Woodilla, 2009; Leifer, & Steinert, 2011; Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla, & Petinkaya, 2013) find it a powerful methodology for innovation which integrates human, business and technical factors in problem forming, solving and design. What is more, it is human-centered and simultaneously uses diverse points-of-view in problem-solution. Thus, it is in line with humanism and constructivist learning that are among adult learning core theories (Aubrey, & Riley, 2016; Illeris, 2007). The following design thinking tools have been used in the course to enhance learners' 21st century skills: problem solution, collabs, visualisation, journey mapping, value chain analysis, mind mapping, concept mapping and prototyping.

Vialogues – a combination of an audio dialogue and video accompanied by certain tasks, as well as audio and video tasks develop language skills, and

depending on their content they may be useful in developing respect for diversity and flexibility, too, since both content and its presentation are important therein.

Case studies have become a popular learning tool in many disciplines and, based on teachers' accounts, they have a very wide spectrum of application. In the given project a case study is defined as a learning strategy through which learners are required to consider debate and offer possible solutions to the problem questions stemming from real-life or simulated problem situations (Stone, & Ineson, 2015). The case studies used in the target course start with background information that helps understanding the specific context of the case. Other stages include explanations of the tasks, warm-up activities, the case, references, tasks, additional literature and they conclude with providing further topics for discussion that serve as a linking element to the next tasks.

To sum up, the concept elaborated includes the course framework, the skills developed and the teaching/learning tools applied and as it complies with the adult learner needs and adult learning theories it is useful for learning a language and increasing learners' cultural knowledge and developing their 21st century skills.

CONCLUSIONS

The world is changing due to the expanding globalisation trends and increasing digitalisation. Population ageing in many parts of the world, especially in Europe, deepens those changes. As highlighted by the European Commission (n.d.) individuals must rely on consistent professional development in order to remain competitive. A focus on continuous adult learning is therefore vital for Europe to overcome economic challenges, meet demands for new skills and to maintain productivity. Learning is also essential for social inclusion, active citizenship and participation in a progressively digitised economy. Therefore, it is topical to research adult learning specifics in order to create a learning course that would enable learners to become more competitive and increase their well-being.

The research indicates that an on-line learning course for adult learners, including blended-learning, must be based on the classic adult learning principles established by the adult education pillars – Knowles (1984), Kolb (1984), Rogers (1996), Illeris (2004, 2007) and supplemented with the analysis of the certain socio-cultural context, learners' backgrounds, needs, motivation, learning styles and strategies.

The current culture-based blended-learning course targeted at developing adult learners' 21st century skills applying CLIL methodology and innovative learning tools provides an opportunity to develop relevant skills and gain knowledge on European cultural heritage simultaneously enhancing learners' language competences and securing the social inclusion of the learners with certain obstacles to learning (geographic, cultural, social, educational) as it is

an opportunity to learn from any place at any time at a speed most suitable to a learner and receive individualised support from the teacher. At the same time learners can develop collaboration, problem-solving, critical thinking and other skills as a considerable part of the course is devoted to group work, projects and other creativity enhancing tasks.

The adult learners' skills developed and cultural knowledge increased will help them enriching their knowledge and competences, thus leading to higher upskilling and higher employability and quality, consequently resulting at fostering their inclusion in the labour market, and becoming true lifelong learners.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This paper deals with the first stage of the results stemming from explorations of teachers' experience. Learners' and teachers' feedback on the course piloting will be collected during the second stage of the research.

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