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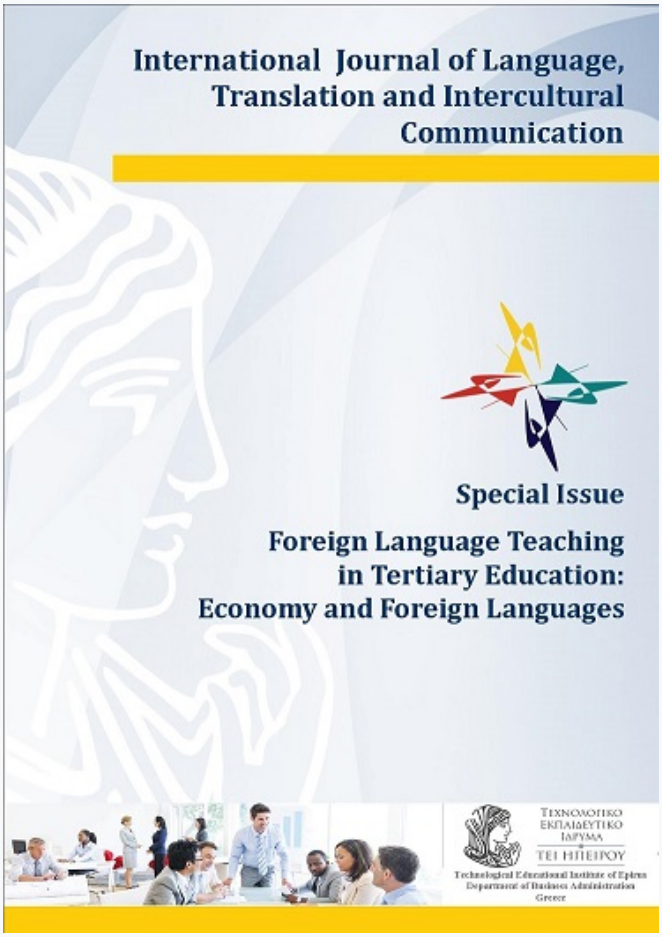


# Intercultural perceptions among undergraduate students in English for Business and Economics courses.

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# Intercultural perceptions among undergraduate students in English for Business and Economics courses.

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**Abstract**

*The practice of intercultural communication should be a primary goal of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) courses in tertiary education, because, through language instruction, future professionals can become aware of intercultural differences and develop strategies to deal with them, thus equipping themselves with necessary skills for effective cross-cultural communication in a globalized work environment. In this study, the intercultural awareness of first and second year undergraduate students attending an English for Business and Economics course was examined in relation to their interest in the economy and culture of other countries as well as to their preferred sources of information about current economic issues. Their preferences and perceptions regarding the intercultural elements incorporated in the methods and material used in the English course were also explored. The analysis of the Likert-type questionnaire revealed that intercultural awareness needs to be further practiced in class and led to important implications for the teaching methods and tasks used in the LSP courses.*

***Keywords**: Intercultural awareness, English for Business and Economics*

## 1 Introduction

The ever increasing tendency of integration in the realms of economy, technology and environment has led to a highly globalized world, in which people of different cultures are closely connected. The ease of communication and transportation across borders creates an environment where people of different cultural backgrounds need to cooperate either as professionals or citizens for common purposes. Therefore, globalization is likely to give more prominence to cultural differences and cause intercultural conflict (Zhang & McCornac: 2013), in the effort to achieve a common course of thinking and acting, overarching any differences in values, social practices, individual attitudes and mentality.

These conflicts are likely to be dwindled due to 'intercultural awareness', which is the ability to 'empathize and decenter', thus being able to take into consideration the interlocutors' different cultural and national perspectives and facilitate communication (Korzilius et al. 2007). In fact, 'intercultural awareness' seems to be one of the prerequisites for a developed 'intercultural competence', which is the ability to 'change one's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors so as to be open and flexible to other cultures' (Alred & Byram, 2002 in Zhou & Griffiths, 2011: 114). In fact, according to Zhou & Griffiths (2011: 114), intercultural competence presupposes not only cultural awareness and communicative competence, but also 'personal attitudes like empathy and flexibility, self-awareness and understanding others' values, norms and beliefs'.

### 1.1 Intercultural awareness and competence in foreign language instruction

The need for citizens with developed intercultural communication skills has influenced the design of educational initiatives, curricula and syllabi, which cater for classrooms consisting of various

ethnic groups and linguistic backgrounds as well as for future citizens living and working in multicultural contexts. In the European Union, for example, the Council of Europe has been undertaking various projects, which aim at the promotion of skills for multicultural societies, under the prism of 'European citizenship', such as the Common European Framework for Languages (CEF), which specifies a set of competencies that language learners should acquire in order for them to be able to perform a variety of actions in the target language. One of these competencies is 'intercultural awareness', which facilitates the effective communication with speakers of other languages, because it enables the interlocutors to use appropriate strategies, thus showing 'cultural sensitivity' and being able to act as 'intercultural intermediaries' in conflict situations (CEF: 2001, 104-105).

Foreign language courses could form an ideal environment for the development of intercultural competence and awareness, since the learning process can be facilitated by the use of authentic material and activities that simulate real-life and context-specific situations (Byram *et al*. 2002; Reid, 2014). Schulz (2007) and Sinicrope *et al*. (2007) also suggest that intercultural competence should not only be taught but also assessed in foreign language courses. In fact, the incorporation of the target culture into the foreign language learning process is very likely to improve the students' respect for cultural differences and induce active involvement in intercultural interactions (Zhou & Griffiths, 2011: 114), whereas Korzilious *et al*. (2007) further support that acquiring a foreign language and being exposed to foreign language communication can improve the learners' intercultural awareness. More specifically, the Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) courses, whose main aim is to train future international professionals, should provide exposure not only to language but to culture as well. In the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), in particular, a lot of scholars have underscored the importance of culture and the need for the development of the learners' intercultural competence, through ESP instruction (Zoranyan, 2008; Lindner, 2010; Tang, 2014). Luka (2007: 7), in particular, claims that 'intercultural competence' is a component of 'ESP competence', along with 'communicative competence' and 'professional activity'.

Within the frame of ESP instruction, a sub-field which is highly influenced by cross-cultural communication skills due to the internationalization of economy is the world of business and economic transactions, in which professionals need to sufficiently use a common code of communication, in order to achieve important goals. Nowadays, English is still considered to be the most common language to be used in intercultural encounters in this sector. Indeed, the term 'Business English Lingua Franca' (BEFL) denotes the corporate language that many businesses and multi-national organizations have chosen for their 'organization-wide communication', since English is usually mastered by most of the employees (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salimen, 2013: 19). Zheng (2015), in addition, mentions that business communication can be greatly benefitted by professionals with developed intercultural communication skills, because such skills contribute to quicker problem solving and decision making, stronger business relationships and professional image as well as to increased productivity. Therefore, ESP courses in Business and Economics should prioritize on the development of the learners' intercultural awareness and competence, conforming to the modern demands for professionals that are efficient and effective in cross-cultural negotiations. The usefulness of developing intercultural competence for business purposes through language instruction has also been reported by other studies (Wang, 2010; Zoranyan, 2008).

### 1.2 Purpose of the study

The objective of the paper is to explore the undergraduates' perceptions and attitudes regarding specific intercultural aspects incorporated in an English for Business and Economics course, in the context of Greek tertiary education. It aims to explore the undergraduates' attitude towards information about foreign culture and economy as well as their perceptions regarding the methodology and material used in the English course intending to cultivate their intercultural competence.

Therefore, the research questions in this paper are the following ones:

1. Are Greek University students interested in the economy and culture of other countries?
2. Which are their most preferred sources of information about the global economy?
3. Do they prefer those types of teaching methods / activities that can develop their intercultural competence (e.g. collaborative tasks) or do they opt for more traditional ones (e.g. lectures)?
4. Do they believe that the ESP/EAP course helps them to get informed about economic issues?
5. How do they believe that the ESP/EAP course could develop their communication skills on economic issues?

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Sample characteristics

The research sample consisted of first and second year students (n=151 and n=157 respectively), who studied in the Department of Economics in the University of Thessaly (Greece). Their age ranged from 18 to 23 years and their nationality was mainly Greek (99%), according to data based on the Secretariat recordings.

The undergraduate students in the Department of Economics have to attend the ESP/EAP course in the first four semesters of their studies. The course focuses on terminology relating to General Economics and Business, which is practiced through reading technical and scientific texts and watching audiovisual material on relative topics. All the reading texts and videos come from foreign sources (books, the Press, TV channels, etc.). Moreover, the students are encouraged to resort to foreign sources when they have to collect material for a variety of assignments (e.g. oral presentations, written projects, etc.). Therefore, their contact with the foreign culture on issues that relate to Economics is likely to raise their intercultural awareness, which can also be cultivated through specific units in their course-books that focus on intercultural issues (e.g. business etiquette in various countries, cultural do's and don'ts in business communication, etc.).

### 2.2 Data collection

The survey was conducted in June 2015. The participants were asked to complete a printed Likert-scale questionnaire, which was delivered in Greek and comprised two parts (see its translated version in the Appendix). The first part consisted of four statements focusing on information about the students' interest in the foreign economy and culture as well as on the

preferred sources of information about economic issues. The second part related to the ESP/EAP course they had attended and explored their preferences in the methods of instruction and the teaching material.

### 2.3 Data analysis

The analysis was descriptive and the data were analyzed by using the SPSS statistical package.

## 3 Results

The first two statements in the questionnaire attempted to explore whether undergraduate students are interested in being informed about the economy and culture of foreign countries. The analysis of the responses revealed that first and second year students seem to be positive in receiving information about the economies of foreign countries, although the percentage of positive responses was not very high in second year students. Moreover, the undergraduates in both groups showed a slightly greater preference to receiving information about the culture of foreign countries than their economy (see Table 1).

Table 1: Undergraduates with a positive attitude towards receiving information about foreign economies and cultures.

| **Positive attitude towards:** | **First year students** | **Second year students** |
|---|---|---|
| Foreign economies | 50,4% | 42,0% |
| Foreign cultures | 56,3% | 54,7% |

Regarding the most preferred sources of information about current economic issues, the participants could choose among the Greek and foreign media, their friends and family. The results showed that both first and second year students mostly preferred the Greek media, their friends and family as sources of information about global economic issues, whereas foreign media were not preferred a lot, especially by first year undergraduates (see Table 2).

Table 2: Preferred sources of information about current economic issues.

| **Source of information** | **First year students** | **Second year students** |
|---|---|---|
| Greek media (only) | 52,8% | 49,6% |
| Friends and family | 49,6% | 43,2% |
| Greek and foreign media | 31,7% | 36,8% |
| Foreign media (only) | 22,7% | 36,3% |

Another dimension of the undergraduates' interest in global economic issues and intercultural awareness was also analyzed by exploring whether they think it is important for them to be able to discuss economic issues with foreigners. The analysis of the results revealed that first year students, in particular, do not show keen interest in developing this skill, although this seems to slightly change with second year students, who seem to be more positive in this type of communication (see Table 3).

Table 3: Attitude towards the ability to be able to communicate with foreigners on economic issues.

| **Attitude** | **First year students** | **Second year students** |
|---|---|---|
| Positive | 32,5% | 41,4% |
| Neutral | 31,8% | 22,3% |
| Negative | 35,8% | 36,3% |

One of the aims of the second part of the questionnaire was to explore whether the undergraduates believe that the ESP/EAP course in Economics and Business can really contribute to their ability to receive information about the economy of other countries, by bringing them into contact with relevant articles in the foreign media, scientific journals and audiovisual material. First year students seemed to have a more positive attitude towards the contribution of the ESP/EAP course than second year students. However, as can be seen in Table 4, this positive attitude is overshadowed by the sum of the percentages that reflect a neutral and negative attitude towards this aspect of the course.

Table 4: Undergraduates' responses to the question of whether the ESP/EAP course can help them receive information about foreign economies.

| **Responses** | **First year students** | **Second year students** |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 49,7% | 37,7% |
| No | 22,2% | 35,4% |
| Neutral | 28,1% | 26,9% |

Concerning the undergraduates' perceptions about how the ESP/EAP course could help them to communicate with foreigners on economic issues, the majority answered that the practice of technical vocabulary through reading texts and audiovisual material on topics related to Business and Economics would be really helpful. The practice of oral communication skills through oral presentations and role plays is also considered important and is followed by the practice of writing communication skills, in the form of formal emails, letters and reports (Table 5).

Table 5: Undergraduates' perceptions regarding the ways in which the ESP/EAP course could help them communicate with foreigners on economic issues.

| **Practice of:** | **First year students** | **Second year students** |
|---|---|---|
| technical vocabulary | 61,0% | 53,5% |
| oral communication skills | 56,9% | 48,5% |
| writing communication skills | 47,3% | 42,5% |

What was also intended to be explored were the undergraduates' preferences regarding the method of learning and instruction followed in the ESP/EAP class, given that an active learning environment that involves students in collaborative tasks could promote the development of communication skills that are necessary when contacting people of different cultural backgrounds. The results showed that first year students seemed to prefer the traditional teaching model of lectures, contrary to second year students that seemed to be a little more positive towards active learning, through collaborative tasks. Regarding the material used for instruction purposes, both first and second year undergraduates presented a positive attitude towards learning through authentic texts and audiovisual material on economic issues, although first year students seemed to be slightly more interested in dealing with material on cultural issues (Table 6).

Table 6: Undergraduates' positive attitude towards the method of learning and material for instruction in the ESP/EAP course.

| **Positive attitude towards:** | **First year students** | **Second year students** |
|---|---|---|
| lectures | 51,7% | 40,0% |
| collaborative tasks | 35,1% | 46,5% |
| texts / audiovisual material on economic issues | 47,7% | 47,8% |
| texts /audiovisual material on | 53,0% | 48,4% |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| cultural issues | | |

## 4 Discussion

The analysis of the responses to the questionnaire shows that the undergraduate students seem to have a positive attitude towards receiving information about other economies and cultures, but, there are also many of them that have a neutral or even negative attitude towards this type of information. This shows that these students' intercultural awareness needs to be further developed, in order for them to be fully prepared for the requirements of the global professional market. Additionally, several of the participants in the study also think that the ability to discuss economic issues with foreigners is not so important. If this finding is combined with the students' limited interest in foreign media as a source of information about current economic issues, it seems that undergraduates in this study show some introversion, since they have a stronger preference for the Greek media, friends and family as sources of information about the global economic situation. This attitude could probably create some difficulties in the development of intercultural communication skills in the ESP/EAP course that should be overcome.

Given that the respondents (especially the first year students) showed a slightly greater interest in receiving information about the culture of foreign countries than their economy, instruction in the ESP/EAP courses should probably incorporate more opportunities of familiarizing students with the target culture. Besides, economy and culture seem to be closely related, since economic practices can be affected by the cultural characteristics that form a country's identity (Guiso, *et al*., 2006; Castells, 2011). The practice of intercultural awareness in an ESP/EAP course could probably be facilitated by using and comparing information from a variety of sources, both native and foreign. For example, the discussion about how a current economic issue is presented in the Greek and in the foreign media respectively could highlight striking differences in the culture and mentality of the people that have written the articles. This process could enable the students to compare their own culture and reality with foreign ones. This kind of comparison is a prerequisite for the development of their own intercultural awareness and competence (Zheng, 2015: 197).

Therefore, the design of the material and the method of instruction followed in an ESP/EAP course should take into consideration the students' preferences, in terms of what they really need to be informed about and the way they think is more effective for them to learn. Regarding the method of instruction and learning followed in the ESP/EAP course in this study, for example, the undergraduates seem to have a shift in their preference from the traditional style of attending to lectures (first year students) to more active learning styles, like participating in collaborative tasks (second year students). This change could bring about positive results in the process of developing the students' intercultural awareness and communication skills, which can be more effectively developed with tasks that promote collaboration and simulate real life contexts of communication.

Moreover, the analysis of the perceptions of the undergraduate students has shown that those who believe that the ESP/EAP course helps them to receive information about the economy of other countries do not form a strong majority. Most of them believe that the ESP/EAP course can help them to communicate with foreign people on economic issues mainly through the practice of technical vocabulary on economic issues, whereas the practice of oral and written communication skills is considered less important. These findings should be taken into consideration during the selection of course content and the design of tasks, which should conform to the undergraduates'

needs, who are adult learners as well. According to Knowles *et al*. (2005), adult learners need to self-direct their learning and are more likely to be actively involved in the learning process if the activities chosen are experiential and problem-solving, resembling real-life and work experiences. Such a learning environment can be ideal for the promotion of teamwork and creative problem-solving thinking, which can also favor interpersonal in-class communication that is the first step towards communication with other people in a cross-cultural, non-academic environment.

## Conclusions

This study leads to important implications regarding the teaching methodology, the content and the selection of tasks in LSP courses. As far as task design is concerned, integrated tasks, which combine the practice of various skills can be really helpful in developing intercultural sensitivity and global awareness. For example, the specialized texts which function as the main source of teaching technical vocabulary can be combined with audiovisual material on relevant specialized topics, which could be found on foreign media websites and lead to a variety of oral and/or written activities, whose completion requires the students' collaboration in the form of project work. In particular, students at an undergraduate level could engage in activities that ask them to search for information on a variety of foreign websites, in order to orally present a topic related to their discipline or create a webpage of their own. Alternatively, they could be asked to imagine that they have to communicate with a colleague from another country, in order to perform a task that resembles one in the real professional world. In any case, the comparison of the domestic culture with a foreign one through a variety of discourses and contexts is expected to lead to intercultural awareness. In addition, the effort to successfully complete these skill-integrated activities contributes to the development of effective presentation skills, in the context of group work, thus creating a motivating learning environment.

Moreover, foreign language instruction should conform to the needs of the highly demanding and internationalized workplace, by focusing on the learners' development of intercultural awareness and competence through updated methods. The LSP courses, in particular, should be technologically updated in order for students to be encouraged to participate in discussion forums and chat sessions (Baker, 2015), where they can have the opportunity to comment on various issues in the field of their discipline and exchange opinions with colleagues abroad. Another use of technology towards this direction could be the students' engagement in international projects with undergraduates in foreign Universities. Teleconferencing can provide the main means by which students could come into contact and collaborate with students abroad, by exchanging information about various issues, facts and problems in their countries. (Krajka *et al*. 2013, Yang, 2013). The engagement in such activities could raise the learners' motivation and underscore the importance of collaborative tasks in developing oral and written communication skills, which were regarded as less important than knowledge of technical vocabulary by the students in our study.

Additionally, the undergraduates' contact with foreign cultures could be promoted by encouraging them to participate in international exchange programs, such as Erasmus or arrange their internships in a foreign country, thus making them aware of the variety of opportunities that exist in the field of academic or work-based mobility. According to Weltzer *et al*. (2010: 436), these transnational partnerships do not only help disperse expertise, but also promote the development of language and cultural competencies. This is also supported by several other

studies (e.g. Dolga, *et.al*, 2015, Molu, *et.al*, 2014; Behrnda & Porzeltb, 2012), all of which highlight the value of international exchanges, because they do not only add to the participants' academic and career qualifications, but they also promote their 'cultural intelligence' (Sutherland, *et.al*, 2015), which enables them to bridge any language or cultural gaps and effectively communicate in culturally diverse settings. Since at the tertiary level of education Erasmus exchange programs allow students from various countries to attend a part of their undergraduate course in Greek universities as well, it would be ideal if Erasmus students attending LSP were actively involved in group projects, thus communicating with the students of the host country and benefitting from cross-cultural exchanges.

Given that one of the primary goals of any language course is effective language learning, the ESP/EAP courses that incorporate intercultural features in their syllabus are very likely to achieve this aim more effectively, if they favor a more frequent contact with the target culture, through a variety of authentic activities, thus promoting the students' internal motivation and active involvement. In this way, language and life skills can be simultaneously developed, leading to professionals that can also be considered 'global citizens'.

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**Appendix: Questionnaire completed by first and second year undergraduate students having attended the ESP/EAP courses in the Department of Economics (University of Thessaly)**

1. I completely agree 2. I agree 3. I neither agree nor disagree
4. I disagree 5. I completely disagree

**PART I: RECEIVING INFORMATION ABOUT THE ECONOMY**

1. I am interested in receiving information about the economy of foreign countries (other than Greece) 1 2 3 4 5

2. I am interested in receiving information about the culture / civilization of foreign countries.
   1 2 3 4 5

3. I receive information about current economic issues form:
   a. the Greek media 1 2 3 4 5
   b. the foreign media 1 2 3 4 5
   c. the Greek and foreign media 1 2 3 4 5
   d. friends and family 1 2 3 4 5

4. I am interested in being able to discuss economic issues with people that do not speak Greek.
   1 2 3 4 5

**PART II: PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE ESP/EAP COURSE**

5. I believe that the ESP/EAP course can help me to receive information about the economy of other countries (through scientific papers, information on the Web, audiovisual material, etc.)
   1 2 3 4 5

6. In the ESP/EAP class I prefer to:
   a. attend a lecture 1 2 3 4 5
   b. collaborate with other students in group activities (written /oral) or research projects
      1 2 3 4 5
   c. receive information on economic issues from texts / audiovisual material from the foreign Press 1 2 3 4 5
   d. receive information about foreign cultures from texts / audiovisual material from the foreign Press 1 2 3 4 5

7. I believe that the ESP/EAP course can help me to communicate on economic issues with people that do not speak Greek, by:
   a. focusing on economic terms / technical vocabulary
      1 2 3 4 5
   b. developing my oral communication skills (e.g. expressing and justifying opinion, agreeing or disagreeing, asking for clarifications, presenting a topic etc.)
      1 2 3 4 5
   c. developing my written communication skills (e.g. writing formal letters, emails, reports etc.)
      1 2 3 4 5

**About the Authors**

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