

Developing intercultural competence through an eTwinning project about legends

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SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU
UČITELJSKI FAKULTET
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Elena Babić

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THROUGH AN ETWINNING PROJECT ABOUT LEGENDS**

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Mentor rada: doc. dr. sc. Ivana Milković

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Contents

SUMMARY	i
SAŽETAK.....	ii
INTRODUCTION	1
1. ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE.....	2
1.1. English in Croatian schools	2
1.2. Embracing technology	3
2. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE	6
2.1. Definition.....	6
2.2. Croatian curriculum.....	8
2.3. Development of intercultural competence	10
2.4. Relevance of intercultural competence.....	11
3. ETWINNING	13
3.1. eTwinning purpose.....	14
3.2 eTwinning projects and partner-finding	15
3.3. Conferences and working groups	16
3.4. Benefits of eTwinning	17
3.5. Challenges and recommendations	18
4. METHODOLOGY.....	19
4.1. Research aim and method	19
4.2. Participants	20
4.3. Instrument	20
4.4. Process.....	22
4.5. Results and discussion	30
CONCLUSION	37
REFERENCES	38
Appendix 1. The vignette used in this research.....	44
Appendix 2. The Legend of Labatorians.....	45
Izjava o izvornosti završnog/diplomskog rada	46

SUMMARY

In an increasingly globalized and diverse world, it is essential to provide students with the essential skills and mindsets necessary to engage with other cultures. Learning English as a universal language does not only facilitate communication but also promotes openness and understanding of other cultures. For that reason, it is important to work on developing intercultural competence of students as it fosters a sense of inclusion, empathy and mutual understanding. Recognizing its significance, the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education has made intercultural competence a priority by incorporating it into the curriculum. Although intercultural competence is spread across various subjects, this study will focus on its development within the context of learning English.

The eTwinning platform, which facilitates connections between both teachers and students across Europe, plays an important role in developing intercultural competence. Moreover, it is an excellent opportunity to enhance ICT (Information and Communication Technology) skills among participants.

The aim of this thesis is to present findings of a research conducted through the eTwinning project named *Legends & Culture*, designed to assess the levels of intercultural competence among participating students before and after its implementation. The project involved fifth-grade students from Karlovac (Croatia) and Tbilisi (Georgia), who were given the task of creating comic books representing their national legends. The project included four meetings with Croatian students, two of which were Zoom sessions with their Georgian counterparts. The thesis argues that engaging in a project of this kind can lead to a development of students' intercultural competences.

Keywords: students' intercultural competence, ICT, curriculum, legends, eTwinning project, English as a foreign language (EFL)

SAŽETAK

U svijetu koji je sve više globaliziran i u kojem se sve više ističe raznolikost, ključno je osigurati učenicima osnovne vještine i potaknuti načine razmišljanja potrebne za interakciju s drugim kulturama. Učenje engleskog kao univerzalnog jezika ne samo da olakšava komunikaciju, već potiče otvorenost i razumijevanje drugih kultura. Iz tog je razloga važno uključiti razvijanje međukulturne kompetencije u poučavanje jer ona potiče osjećaj pripadnosti, empatije i međusobnog razumijevanja. Prepoznavši njenu kvalitetu, Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja Republike Hrvatske pridalo joj je prioritetnu važnost uključivanjem u kurikulum. Iako je ona rasprostranjena kroz različite predmete, ovaj rad fokusirat će se na njen razvitak u kontekstu učenja engleskog jezika.

eTwinning platforma, koja olakšava povezivanje između učitelja i učenika diljem Europe, ima važnu ulogu u razvijanju međukulturne kompetencije. Osim toga, pruža izvrsnu priliku za unaprjeđivanje vještina informacijsko-komunikacijske tehnologije.

Cilj ovoga rada je predstaviti rezultate istraživanja razvijanja međukulturne kompetencije u učenika putem eTwinning projekta pod nazivom *Legends & Culture*. Projekt je osmišljen s ciljem istraživanja razvoja međukulturne kompetencije među sudjelujućim učenicima putem eTwinninga. Projekt je uključio učenike petih razreda iz Karlovca (Hrvatska) i Tbilisija (Gruzija). Učenici su imali zadatak stvoriti stripove iz njihove kulture, tj. iz narodnih legendi. Tijekom projekta održana su četiri susreta s hrvatskim učenicima, od kojih su dva bila Zoom sastanci s gruzijskim učenicima. Rezultati istraživanja su pokazali da sudjelovanje u ovakvoj vrsti projekta može dovesti do razvoja međukulturne kompetencije u učenika.

Ključne riječi: međukulturna kompetencija učenika, informacijsko-komunikacijska tehnologija, kurikulum, legende, eTwinning projekt, engleski kao strani jezik

INTRODUCTION

Intercultural competence is undeniably one of the most important skills to acquire for adapting to the modern interconnected world. As global interactions increase, its importance only grows larger. Daily cases of racism, stereotypes and prejudices are frequently witnessed in the media, highlighting the importance of cultivating intercultural awareness worldwide. Instilling the right mindset in younger generations holds the potential for creating a more tolerant world. No one is inherently born with biased views; they develop due to the lack of proper education centered on understanding and respecting diverse cultures. Introducing the concept of it from an early age is essential, as it can have a positive impact on a person's attitudes as they grow older. By cultivating a culture of understanding, respect and empathy, the world can become a harmonious place where everyone feels validated and proud of their cultural background, while also displaying openness towards learning and appreciating other cultures.

The eTwinning platform is purposefully designed to promote the development of intercultural competence in teachers and their students, but also to enhance their ICT skills. It played an important role in executing *Legends & Culture* project, serving as a starting point for developing the project idea, as well as for finding suitable partners through its feature designed specifically for that purpose. The objective of this thesis is to explore the intercultural awareness of the Croatian participants by assessing whether the implementation of this intercultural telecollaborative project had a positive impact on their intercultural competence skills.

The first three chapters are devoted to a comprehensive literature review of key terms that are crucial for a deeper understanding of the project's nature and objectives. The review starts with an exploration of English as a foreign language, followed by a discussion about intercultural competence, concluding with an examination of the eTwinning platform. Furthermore, the fourth chapter describes and discusses the research methodology, highlighting the *Legends & Culture* project as the focal point of this thesis. Lastly, the fifth chapter serves as a conclusion, providing a summary and final remarks on the research.

1. ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

The extensive global usage of English language established it as an international language. Despite being ranked third in terms of native speakers (after Mandarin and Spanish), it is the most used language in the world. Modiano (1999) uses this fact to emphasize the distinction between English and other languages previously regarded as *lingua franca*, adding that no other *lingua franca* has undergone such thorough investigation as English has. As a result, numerous language theories have emerged, as well as learning theories, which explore conditions of learning English as a foreign language. The term refers to the communication in English between non-native speakers of the language. Additionally, within the domain of language education, it is commonly referred to as *English as a foreign language* (EFL) and *English as a second language* (ESL), among other terms. Stern (1983) discussed the distinctions between these two terms, which deal with language function, learning objectives, language environment and learning approaches. Fundamentally, EFL involves learning English in a non-native English country, whereas ESL implies learning English as a second language, playing a role similar to that of the mother tongue. For example, in a country such as the United States, there are many non-native speakers of English who learn it as a second language (ESL), aiming to integrate it into their daily communication and adapt to their new life. On the other hand, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) in Croatian primary and secondary schools since it is not the native language for Croatian people. Hence, it is learned primarily for international communication with speakers of other languages. It can be concluded that EFL enables its learners to become global citizens by overcoming the language barrier.

1.1. English in Croatian schools

English has been studied as a foreign language in Croatia for decades. However, in the academic year 2003/2004, learning a foreign language was introduced as mandatory from the first grade of primary school. Interest for learning English in Croatia is increasing to this day (Državni zavod za statistiku). When discussing English within the context of early education, it is impossible not to acknowledge the contribution of Mirjana Vilke, who stands out as one of the most prolific

researchers in this field of studies. One of her many research studies suggests that the most suitable age for introducing a foreign language to children is when they are approximately six to seven years old. Vilke states: "...children of 6+ can learn foreign languages even in a school environment provided teaching is shaped according to the psychomotoric and intellectual requirements of this complex age" (Vilke, 2013, p. 194). This aligns with the mandatory start of the English education in Croatia, as first graders are of that age. Nowadays, the learning process starts as early as in kindergarten, continuing throughout primary and secondary school education. Therefore, it is an integral part of the educational system, which reflects its significance as a global language. Many consider English language as the gateway to a more promising career, higher social status and an enhanced quality of life (Mihaljević Djigunović & Geld, 2002). As a result, it comes as no surprise that future generations are encouraged to learn it in order to have a prosperous future.

Mihaljević Djigunović (2007) conducted research examining various affective factors related to learning English, such as students' attitudes towards the language, as well as their motivation and anxiety levels. To distinguish them from cognitive factors, affective factors will be referred to as *affective profiles*, as described by the author. A questionnaire was distributed to both primary school students and secondary school students in Croatia. The results showed that primary school students have a less positive affective profile compared to students attending secondary schools. The same can be observed for male students in comparison to female students. Moreover, the study revealed that primary school learners from urban areas demonstrate a considerably more positive affective profile in comparison to their countryside counterparts. In addition, it was found that students benefit from being exposed to the English language beyond the school setting and from learning other languages alongside English (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2007 *ibid*).

1.2. Embracing technology

As the world keeps modernizing, it is important to adapt the education system accordingly, prioritizing the integration of information technology, more specifically, information and communication technologies (ICT), for the sake of preparing students for the requirements of the digital age. ICT is defined as a diverse set of technological tools and resources used to transmit,

store, create, share or exchange information.¹ Undoubtedly, the majority of children are exposed to ICT outside of the educational system, as it has become an integral part of everyday life. In fact, it can be presumed that they encounter some form of technological tools and resources even before they begin primary school. However, this exposure does not undermine the significance of ICT in education, as school is a place where students can learn how to use ICT responsibly and for educational purpose. Kent and Facer (2004) contemplate this matter, observing that the use of computers at home tends to be more limited compared to the school environment which provides a broader range of activities.

Teachers shoulder the responsibility of integrating ICT into their classrooms. According to Ward and Parr (2010), teachers must have a sense of self-assurance in facilitating the learning process of this kind, as confidence is essential for successfully incorporating ICT into teaching. Consequently, when utilized effectively, it is beneficial for both educators and learners, as it cultivates an interactive learning environment. Moreover, Serhan (2009) states that ICT empowers teachers and enables them to create their own teaching materials. This would eliminate the need for reliance on printed materials associated with the traditional approach, which subsequently reduces unnecessary or excessive use of paper, thus promoting a more sustainable option. Another significant distinction between using ICT in learning and the traditional approach is the level of student autonomy, as ICT fosters a more student-oriented environment. This results in students having a certain degree of control in their learning experience, gaining independence and confidence in the process. This independence can also be reflected in the flexibility ICT provides. To illustrate, Koc (2005) explains that the utilization of ICT allows students to engage in communication and collaboration without constraints of time and place, which enables them to do their tasks conveniently from any location and at any time.

Using ICT in the EFL classroom offers many advantages as well, notably by enhancing interactive practice through activities such as collaborative projects with international students. These dynamic learning experiences are likely to hold more meaning and engagement compared to the traditional reliance on textbooks and other printed materials. The incorporation of ICT can also reduce students' language learning anxiety by providing them an opportunity to practice target

¹ICT definition. Retrieved June 10, 2023. From:
<https://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/en/glossary/information-and-communication-technologies-ict>

language within an environment where they are considered digital natives (Al-Mahrooqi & Troudi, 2014).

2. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Culture is a complex concept and therefore may be defined and understood from various perspectives. According to Merriam-Webster², it is defined as: “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.” In a multicultural world, it is important to embrace diversity. Schools provide an excellent opportunity to actively acknowledge and appreciate cultural diversity, allowing students positive interactions that are beneficial for fostering this mindset. With that in mind, it is vital to prioritize the teaching of intercultural competence.

2.1. Definition

By observing the Latin prefix “inter”, it becomes evident that *intercultural* must address the interactions that occur among two or more cultures. Therefore, intercultural competence can be defined as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2006, p. 247). However, it should be noted that various studies use a range of terms to describe the mentioned ability, such as “multicultural competence”, “intercultural sensitivity”, “cross-cultural awareness” and “global competence” (Fantini, 2009). Hunter, White and Godbey (2006) refer to it as “global competence”, describing it as “having an open mind while actively seeking to understand cultural norms and expectations of others, and leveraging this gained knowledge to interact, communicate and work effectively in diverse environments” (p. 270).

Often, educators claim that their approach in teaching is intercultural, yet they merely incorporate oversimplified cultural facts and stereotypes while comparing two or more cultures (Andraka, 2020). In the context of teaching English as a foreign language, intercultural competence is intertwined with communicative competence, therefore, it is referred to as intercultural communication competence. In view of Hayati (2015), intercultural communication competence refers to an individuals’ capacity to comprehend the crucial aspects related to language

² Culture definition. Retrieved June 12, 2023, from: <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/cultural>

communication in a diverse cultural context. Byram (1997) developed a conceptual framework consisting of five *savoirs* (French meaning “know”), which represent various dimensions of intercultural competence. The *savoirs* are interconnected in the following manner: attitudes (*savoir être*) and knowledge (*savoirs*) are prerequisite for engaging in intercultural communication, as participants must possess an understanding of their own culture and the culture of their interlocutors. Additionally, they should display openness to establish connections between their own cultural background and that of their interlocutors. Moreover, the skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*) and the skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir faire*) play a significant role in shaping the process of intercultural communication. These skills involve understanding and connecting with other cultures, as well as promptly applying and acquiring knowledge through interaction. Lastly, this stimulates the only remaining skill which is critical cultural awareness (*savoir s’engager*). Byram’s framework aims to provide EFL students with “the means of accessing and analyzing any cultural practices and meanings they encounter, whatever their status in a society” (Byram, 1997, p. 21).

Built upon the research of Byram (1997) and the INCA project (2004), the Council of Europe has developed an instrument called the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (*Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of Europe’s key competences for lifelong learning*, 2006), which is created to help individuals reflect on their personal experiences with such encounters. Intercultural education of this kind works towards enhancing individuals’ intercultural levels. As a result, it is being implemented within educational setting as the intercultural competence, which has become an integral part of the school curriculum.

Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters











 <p>Introduction An overview of all the documents shown below</p>	 <p>Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters for Younger Learners For children who need help from an adult in reading and writing and in thinking back over their encounter.</p>
 <p>Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters Standard version for older learners and adults</p>	 <p>Facilitators' notes Suggestions as to how and when the Autobiography could be used with younger learners</p>
 <p>Facilitators' notes Suggestions as to how and when the Autobiography could be used</p>	 <p>Text cards To structure the discussion with younger learners</p>
 <p>Context, concepts and theories Historical, theoretical and conceptual background to the Autobiography for further study</p>	 <p>Picture cards To introduce children to the idea of an encounter with someone different</p>
 <p>Concepts for discussion A stimulus for discussion and debate in the classroom or seminar group</p>	 <p>Feedback form for facilitators who would like to share their experiences with the AIE development team</p>

Image 1. Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters.

2.2. Croatian curriculum

In order to understand the integration of intercultural competence in the present-day Croatian curriculum, it is important to provide an overview which traces its progress and development throughout the past half-century. The initial traces of interculturality had been introduced into curricular documents more than fifty years ago, and not necessarily in the foreign language curriculum, but as part of the aim of literary education in the mother tongue curriculum for lower grade students in elementary school (Milković, 2023). However, it wasn't until 2006 that

The European Union recognized the importance of this competence, subsequently integrating it into the *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of Europe's key competences for lifelong learning* (2006). Its significance is highlighted in the fact that it was incorporated into three out of eight key competences, one of them being communication in a foreign language. During the same year, the Croatian school curriculum integrated intercultural competence as a component of the foreign language learning (*Nastavni plan i program za školu*, 2006). Five years later, it was further developed (*Nacionalni okvirni kurikulum za predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje te opće obvezno i srednjoškolsko obrazovanje*, 2011), both in foreign language teaching and some integrated areas. In the present-day curriculum, the representation of intercultural competence expanded beyond the boundaries of foreign language education, now being a part of other school subjects and cross-curricular topics. Distinguishing itself from the previous documents, this curriculum is noteworthy because it encompasses both primary and secondary education.

The focus will now be directed to the intercultural competence in the English language curriculum in Croatia. First of all, this curriculum incorporates communication language competence, intercultural communication competence and independence in language acquisition competence as its domains.³ It is explained that these domains are inseparable as the English language is intertwined with the culture and independent learning, which leads to the development of intercultural competence (*Odluka o donošenju kurikulumuma za nastavni predmet Engleski jezik*, 2019). Furthermore, each of them is individually explained, offering insights into the benefits associated with achieving their desired outcomes. Intercultural competence is precisely defined based on these outcomes which are accompanied by recommendations for successfully achieving them. For example, one of the expected outcomes for fifth grade students is that they will be able to “apply foundational knowledge about target countries within one’s own culture” (ibid., p. 38). Furthermore, this outcome is elaborated in four points, one of which describes that students must be able to explain the significance of specific cultural days of the target languages’ culture. These outcomes are achieved mostly through books which provide specific tasks and target vocabulary

³Odluka o donošenju kurikulumuma za nastavni predmet Engleski jezik za osnovne škole i gimnazije u Republici Hrvatskoj. (2019). Retrieved June 9, from Narodne-novine.nm.hr.

intended for achieving it. However, it can be argued that this approach might lack authenticity needed for the development of intercultural competence.



Image 2. Three domains of the English curriculum in Croatia

(*Odluka o donošenju kurikuluma za nastavni predmet Engleski jezik*, 2019)

2.3. Development of intercultural competence

Despite the existence of various models that assess the growth of intercultural competence, Bennett's *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (DMIS; 1986) is widely regarded as one of the most influential models in the field. This research-based model, which has been developed over nearly three decades, aims to explain how people experience cultural differences, placing them on a continuum of increasing sensitivity to cultural differences (Bennett, 2004). This continuum is divided into six stages, extending from *ethnocentrism* to *ethnorelativism*. These

stages are named *denial*, *defense*, *minimization*, *acceptance*, *adaptation* and *integration*. The first three stages belong to *ethnocentrism*, as the individuals categorized within them view the world through the standards of their own culture, making it challenging to perceive it from the perspective of any other culture. On the other hand, the remaining three stages belong to *ethnorelativism*. Individuals categorized within these stages can adapt to the cultural differences and respect them by refraining from making comparisons with their own culture. Based on this, it can be observed that the stages are arranged from the least culturally aware to the most culturally aware, progressing from left to right.

This model served as the foundation for DESI-Studie (Hesse & Göbel, 2007) and the INCA project (2004), which both defined the typical students' responses for each stage mentioned. Furthermore, Šenjug Golub (2013) used these two projects as the foundation for her doctoral dissertation study, using the method of vignettes. It should be noted that while Šenjug Golub's names for the stages slightly vary from Bennett's, they still preserve the same understanding of the progression of intercultural competence. This will become evident later on in this study, as it is based on Šenjug Golub's model (2013).

2.4. Relevance of intercultural competence

The significance of learning how to be interculturally competent has never been greater, given the increasing diversity of the world. In many countries, including Croatia, intercultural competence is recognized as a fundamental aspect of the educational process, as previously discussed. By learning about other cultures and engaging with them, students develop empathy and tolerance, which ultimately leads to cultural appreciation. By promoting these merits, school environment becomes more inclusive, reducing discrimination, including bullying. However, they can be promoted only if the educators are equipped with necessary knowledge and practical resources that foster intercultural competence (Beacco et al., 2010).

Additionally, it is important to take into consideration the fact that the process of developing intercultural competence should not be perceived as an isolated event but rather as a continuous effort. Intercultural competence cannot be achieved overnight; it requires ongoing

commitment to learning and embracing diverse cultures, while demonstrating willingness to adapt and grow.

3. ETWINNING

eTwinning is an online platform designed for both teachers and students. Established in 2005, it is co-funded by the Erasmus+, the European program for Education, Youth and Sport.⁴ Since 2022 eTwinning is a part of the European School Education Platform (ESEP). Nearly two decades after its foundation, eTwinning has experienced remarkable growth, now counting over one million registered users. It involves teachers from thirty-six EU countries and eight non-EU countries, including those located outside of Europe. Inspired by the collaboration of these eight countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Jordan, Lebanon, Republic of Moldova, Tunisia and Ukraine), eTwinning Plus was introduced as an additional platform section. Additionally, eTwinning has introduced numerous new features and functionalities over the years.

Due to its focus on forming international relationships and collaborations, it fosters the development of intercultural competence. Participating in eTwinning projects allows students to gain new experiences and engage with different cultures, which promotes meaningful cultural exchanges.



Image 3. Logo of the eTwinning platform.

⁴eTwinning (official page) available at <https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en/etwinning>

3.1. eTwinning purpose

By connecting schools from different countries, eTwinning enables both teachers and students to participate in various projects which aim to enrich cultural awareness and tolerance towards “the unknown”. It is considered to be a big step forward from the traditional way of learning at schools.

According to Holmes (2013), eTwinning offers a valuable alternative to the traditional teacher training by facilitating collaborative learning and reflective practices among teachers, which enables them to learn alongside their peers from various European regions and countries. The emphasis on collaborative learning and reflection supports continuous development, which is a desirable trait for future educators and the educators who want to embrace this modern approach. Motivated by the aim of enhancing the preparation of future educators, partners from Croatia, Italy, Poland, Romania and Spain collaborated in the international eTwinning project *ITE: Educ@ting for sustainability, from universities to classes*, forging connections between initial teaching training with schools over the academic year 2022/2023. This study demonstrated how the integration of eTwinning into the initial teacher training fosters opportunities for student engagement, introduces unique and inventive resources to enhance the quality of professional development and empowers student teachers to develop both theoretical understanding and practical skills (Luzzini, Milković, Soldo & Nieto Moreno de Diezmas, 2023).

Furthermore, Leto (2018) states that the detachment from traditional school curriculum promotes engagement, as the primary school students are motivated to do something that is effective and concrete. By focusing on tangible outcomes eTwinning promotes, the sense of meaning is achieved, which has a positive impact on the overall teaching experience. Additionally, objectives are focused on improving the technical, language, and intercultural skills of both teachers and their pupils, along with integrating the European dimension into educational programs (Gajek & Poszytek, 2009, p. 13). The European dimension holds a significance due to its importance in studying citizenship, namely, developing empathy, ethnic and religious tolerance (Galvin et al., 2006).

In an increasingly interconnected world, it is essential to teach students these principles. While nurturing one’s own culture through appreciating and preserving cultural heritage, it is also

important to cultivate an understanding of a broader, global culture. Introducing students to diverse cultures at the early stage of their lives can prevent the formation of stereotypes and prejudices towards other cultures. Therefore, eTwinning plays a vital role in promoting inclusivity.

3.2 eTwinning projects and partner-finding

eTwinning offers its users a wide range of projects they can engage in. Nonetheless, educators are not limited to these pre-designed projects. They have the flexibility to create customized projects, according to their specific needs. eTwinning projects cover different subject areas, providing plenty of space for creativity. They are flexible in terms of duration, allowing educators to determine the necessary amount of time required to achieve their desired outcomes. However, prior to executing the project, educators need to find a partner to collaborate with.

While finding an international partner may seem challenging, the eTwinning platform makes it convenient and accessible. Firstly, an educator must go to *Partner Finding* and add posting. After selecting the posting type, eTwinning project idea, they have to post details about the project they want to conduct. These details include the project type, organization, title of the project and its summary, followed by a description. Lastly, educators can filter specific information, enabling them to find the appropriate partner. This includes filtering based on languages, preferred subjects and vocational subjects, tags, key competences and the age level of participants. Once all the necessary information is filled out, educators can publish their posting, making it visible to other educators, their potential partners. Finding a partner usually does not take long. The reason behind the efficient partner finding process is the already mentioned high number of users on the platform, which increases the likelihood of finding a suitable partner. Educators who are interested in the project have the option to leave a comment on the posting or directly message the educator who published it, often providing information about why they are interested in participating. The project begins once the educator has selected a partner to collaborate with. From this point onward, partners must communicate all the necessary details and arrange meetings, thereby ensuring the success of the project. Furthermore, it is important to maintain regular communication with partners, as both parties have to understand their responsibilities. Technology plays an important role in the successful execution of eTwinning

projects. Without it, both teachers and students would face challenges in maintaining communication with their international partners. Given this, schools should have a reliable Internet connection in order to execute a seamless online collaboration.

3.3. Conferences and working groups

eTwinning prioritizes user satisfaction. Therefore, it values receiving high-quality feedback. By actively listening to improvement suggestions, The eTwinning team continuously improves its service. By organizing annual conferences, eTwinning creates a space for receiving feedback, as well as for sharing innovative practices within the community of eTwinners.

In 2022, the annual conference *Equipping Future Teachers with Collaborative, Inclusive and Sustainable Professional Practices via eTwinning* took place, lasting from November 30th to December 2nd. As evident from the title of the conference, eTwinning provides student teachers with opportunities to grow and learn about eTwinning. Hence, recognizing them as individuals who bring innovation to schools when they start their teaching careers. An important part of the conference was a panel discussion in which student teachers had the opportunity to share their experiences with eTwinning projects, offering insights from students' perspective. The conference was highly educational, serving as a reminder of how big and successful the eTwinning community really is. Additionally, participants had the opportunity to gain practical knowledge from the workshops they attended, emphasizing the importance of lifelong learning.

In addition to annual conferences, eTwinning actively supports organizing student teacher groups. They typically start with engaging ice-breaker activities, followed by interactive online activities and informative lectures. The moderators play an important role in monitoring participants' responses, hence ensuring efficient communication. By fostering connections among participants, these workshops promote a strong sense of community. Student teachers can establish connections with like-minded individuals as they have the opportunity of participating in an open chat throughout the entire session, extending their eTwinning circle. Additionally, through active participation in such groups, student teachers can gain a deeper understanding of what eTwinning provides, exploring new ideas and concepts. In summary, student teacher groups offer valuable opportunities to learn and form connections.

3.4. Benefits of eTwinning

Using eTwinning in a classroom has proven to be beneficial in many aspects. First of all, students are eager to work in teams and collaborate with their international peers (Vilà Vendrell, 2022). Furthermore, the students are less reluctant to use English as it is presumably not the first language of their international peers either, which increases motivation and the level of language skills (Demir & Kayaoğlu, 2021). Besides language skills, it also improves students' ICT skills (Papadakis, 2016). Participating in eTwinning projects develops computer skills in a manner that is beneficial to the school community, giving learners who lack computers at home an opportunity to engage in technology-based learning, ensuring everyone has an equal access to digital resources (Gajek, 2017). Moreover, eTwinning projects improve levels of intercultural competence. They offer participants a chance to cultivate global citizenship skills that are essential for life in a globalized world (Henry & Lima, 2012).

In the study conducted by Camilleri (2016), a group of teachers who had experience with eTwinning were interviewed regarding their opinion on it and its influence on students' cultural awareness. The majority of the participants recognized the significant role of eTwinning in fostering the development of intercultural awareness among students. In this regard, Camilleri (2016) claims that "students today are facing a global society which is interconnected. This necessitates competences in digital and cultural integration skills to become successful global citizens" (p. 4).

Lastly, by using the eTwinning platform, teachers can experience professional growth, both formally and informally. The two types of professional growth are in interaction with acknowledgement, which can be expressed in both formal and informal manner. To illustrate, when a teacher engages in an eTwinning project that is considered to be a part of a national professional development program, formal acknowledgement entails receiving additional career points. In contrast, informal acknowledgement of the same teacher would include intrinsic motivation, which would lead the teacher to become an eTwinning mentor for new users and teacher students. As a counterexample, there is a teacher who independently incorporated eTwinning into their teaching practice. Although the engagement is considered to be informal, the teacher may receive formal acknowledgement through additional career points. On the other hand,

the informal acknowledgement would materialize through peer acknowledgement from colleagues due to a teachers' project's success (Vuorikari et al., 2011).

3.5. Challenges and recommendations

While eTwinning undeniably has various positive aspects, it is important to address potential challenges associated with the platform. Bozdağ (2018) recognizes that schools might have strict regulations that influence digital media projects by restricting them. Furthermore, limitations can be observed in teacher-centered approach, which neglects the understanding of intercultural communication. Additionally, Akdemir (2017) conducted a qualitative research study to explore language teachers' experience with eTwinning. One of the inquiries was to identify the disadvantages of this platform from the perspective of teachers. Participants in the study reported that inadequate ICT skills both among teachers and students, challenges related to infrastructure, difficulty in finding appropriate partner and the requirement to act in accordance to curriculum pose serious challenges for teachers. As a part of a similar study conducted by Crisan (2013), Romanian teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire addressing the limitations encountered while implementing eTwinning projects in school. Findings of the research were similar to the ones previously mentioned: some of the challenges highlighted by the teachers are the insufficient support from the school, the difficulty in integrating projects within a certain subject and establishing collaboration. The same challenges were acknowledged by Camilleri (2016), who further notes that creating interesting projects can also be a difficulty.

It can be presumed that these studies may not fully reflect the current state of the platform, considering the advancements in partner finding and pre-designed projects, which could potentially overcome some of the challenges mentioned. However, the reality is that numerous schools lack access to reliable internet connection and do not possess sufficient ICT proficiency, which creates an obstacle for adopting this kind of technology. Unfortunately, even in the 21st century, the use of eTwinning may still be considered a privilege, as not every school has the opportunity to implement it into its teaching practice.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research aim and method

The primary objective of *Legends & Culture* eTwinning project revolves around assessing the levels of intercultural competence among Croatian students that partook in it. These levels were assessed both before and after the implementation of the project. The aim of this research is to gain an understanding of students' intercultural abilities, as well as to identify any potential changes or improvements that occurred during the course of participating in the eTwinning project. Moreover, the project was aimed at raising students' awareness and appreciation of different cultures.

Given all of this into consideration, the following hypotheses were formed:

H1: The students demonstrate a fundamental level of intercultural competence, exhibiting emphatic behavior towards other cultures.

H2: The students demonstrate an improvement in their levels of intercultural competence compared to their initial levels following the participation in the project.

Examining the levels of intercultural competence students possessed before the project provided an insight into their knowledge, skills and attitudes towards people that do not share the same cultural background as them. This initial examination was the starting point of the research. It was crucial to conduct it before the project started as it offered an understanding of students' levels of intercultural competence before they got exposed to Georgian culture through an eTwinning project. During the course of the project students had two online meetings with Georgian students that had a purpose of enriching students' intercultural competence. Because of the nature of their interaction, the students were provided with the opportunity of enhancing their communication skills, as well as to practice active listening. In addition, they were encouraged to foster mutual respect and develop empathy, a genuine understanding and appreciation of perspectives and experiences of their foreign counterparts. This kind of interaction ensured

students' readiness to be assessed again using the same instrument, which allowed the observance of their potential improvements.

4.2. Participants

This research required participants from two different European countries who are approximately of the same age. On the Croatian side, the project involved fifth-grade students from Grabrik Elementary school which is located in Karlovac (Croatia). Their international counterparts were fifth-grade students from the 159th Public School in Tbilisi (Georgia). As both sides attended fifth grade, it was expected that their language proficiency levels would be relatively similar, which would in turn reduce the language barrier. Another age-related advantage was the potential for better peer-to-peer communication, as they are at a relatively similar stage of development. Additionally, fifth-graders are likely to share similar life experiences which could lead to students relating and empathizing with each other. Students of the same age often share common interests. Both Croatian and Georgian students are exposed to Western media, thereby, presumably sharing pop cultural references to films, television shows, music and social media trends. This shared exposure reduces the perception of cultural barrier between Croatia and Georgia, potentially minimizing and bridging cultural differences through the influence of Western culture.

The research focused on Croatian participants of the project. Sixteen students (N=16) participated in the project, engaging in four sessions dedicated to it. It is important to mention that this was the first eTwinning project ever taken by this class, which served as their introduction to the platform.

4.3. Instrument

The instrument used in this project was adapted from Šenjug Golub's doctoral thesis (2013) and further customized to align with *Legends & Culture's* objectives. Šenjug Golub (2013) uses the method of vignettes for evaluating intercultural competence in students from fourth to eighth grade. The particular vignette adapted for this research was originally used in the final study of

intercultural competence in fourth grade (example five). It introduces the problem situation involving two students, one who has recently moved from another country and the other one who is a native. In the vignette, the native student exhibits behavior that is unwelcoming towards the newcomer, creating a challenging situation for students to contemplate. The vignette was modified to fit this particular research and provided in the written form only to the participants from Croatia. Notably, the students were not required to write down their names, ensuring anonymity in their responses. If the students were required to do so, it could have potentially influenced their responses which could have been less sincere. Additionally, the vignette was written in the Croatian language to reduce language anxiety among students and improve their ability to express themselves.

The students were presented with a vignette (Appendix 1.) that portrayed a problem situation involving a new student, George, who is originally from The United Kingdom, but came to live in Croatia with his parents. Naturally, George then had to attend the Croatian school. Petar, one of the students from George's new class, expressed reluctance to sit with his new peer. The vignette was accompanied by four questions which deal with different aspects of the described situation:

1. Why do you think Petar didn't want to sit with George?
2. How do you think George felt in that situation?
3. What would you do if this happened in your classroom?
4. What can be learned from this story?

The first question encouraged the students to reflect on the reasons why Petar might have not wanted to sit with George. The students were required to express their own thoughts of that event. The second question focused on George's feelings in the given situation. Students had to consider and articulate how George might have felt as the new student who was facing rejection from one of his peers. The third question invited the students to imagine themselves in a similar situation as though it had been happening in their own classroom. They had to explore their own emotions if they had been indirectly involved in it, having some sense of responsibility or even guilt. The final, fourth question, encouraged students to consider the lessons that could have been learned from this scenario, encouraging them to express empathy and the importance of inclusivity.

This vignette was employed as an assessment tool to measure students' level of intercultural competence, utilizing a numerical grading system for each of the four questions. On each question students could have earned a score between zero and four points, making a total of sixteen points for all four questions. Based on the descriptors of the final score obtained (Šenjug Golub, 2013), they were categorized into a specific proficiency level on the assessment scale.

The students at the lowest stage of development, *disinterest*, demonstrate a lack of interest and passivity towards the whole situation. The students at the first stage, *defense*, are observant of the conflict that is happening, but they too display passivity or even have a negative perception of George. Students at the second stage, *minimization*, tend to prioritize universal human values. Šenjug Golub (2013) considers this stage to be the one in which intercultural awareness and learning truly begins. At the third stage, *observation*, students can discern negative attitudes towards the foreign pupil, shifting the attention to the student who rejects to interact, labeling him as the cause of the problem for being prejudiced. Lastly, students ranked at the stage four, the stage of *acceptance*, demonstrate a high level of acceptance towards the new student, regardless of his differences. Moreover, they are able to recognize potential sources of conflict.

As previously mentioned, it is important to note that Croatian students filled in the vignette both before and after the eTwinning project with Georgian students. By employing this approach, it was possible to compare the results before and after the project and see if the exposure to the foreign culture had any impact on the level of the intercultural competence students possessed.

4.4. Process

The research took place over the period of four weeks, following the eTwinning project's timeline, specifically during April and May of 2023. There were four sessions, each lasting for one period of 45 minutes.

During the first session, class 5.C was instructed to fill in the vignette. It was evident that some of the students appeared disinterested as they quickly returned the vignette without giving it much thought. On the other hand, others took their time to carefully contemplate the questions and form their answers. Because of the project details shared on the parent permission form and their

English teacher's guidance, the students had a general idea about the subject matter. However, few of the students displayed curiosity about how the vignette related to it.

Following the completion of the vignette, a discussion about the concept of legends was initiated. Legends, as national treasures, have been passed down orally through generations. They hold significant importance, as they offer insights into society's cultural identity. They exist in every country but are not confined to the national level. They can be found in every region, even at the local level, as cities and villages have their own tales too. The variety of legends from different places makes them intriguing, showing a rich tapestry of cultural heritage. As a result, they present an excellent opportunity to engage students in intercultural communication. By relating to their own legends and embracing stories from other cultures, students can develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for the diversity of the world.

The purpose of the discussion was to determine students' familiarity with legends, including their knowledge of these stories and whether they knew if they were originally documented in a written form. Additionally, students were divided into four groups. Each group consisted of four students. They were assigned to recall and share orally as many legends as they can remember with their peers in the group before presenting it to the entire class. Although the students primarily focused on Croatian legends, such as the legend of the origin of Đula's Abyss in Ogulin or the Black Queen's downfall, a few of them went beyond and shared some international legends as well. For example, one group presented a legend that originates in Japan.

Given that students already had some knowledge of legends and the ability to name a few, it was important to determine whether they were familiar with any legends originating from their hometown of Karlovac. Recalling local legends proved to be challenging. However, through collective effort, the class managed to remember a legend about the Labatorians, creatures that are said to live on the banks of the Kupa River which flows through the city of Karlovac.⁵

The legend dates back to the construction of the city. The Zvijezda Fortress builders were cautioned against constructing the city on the territory of the Labatorians, but they proceeded despite the warning. This act angered the Labatorians. As a result, they seek their revenge to this

⁵ The legend can be found online at blog.visitkarlovac.hr, <https://blog.visitkarlovac.hr/2021/12/labatorci/>

day through causing troubles to the citizens of Karlovac. Parents use this legend to frighten their children, claiming that if they do not come home by curfew, there is a chance that the Laborians will abduct them and transform them into soap.

The first session concluded with the collective decision to use the discussed legend for the eTwinning project. The students were eager to conduct further research into the Laborians at home before creating comic book based on the legend during the next session.

The second session took place two weeks after the initial one. At the beginning of the session, each pair of students received a handout containing the legend written in English, adapted to their language level (Appendix 2.). The legend was then read aloud. The students who volunteered read a paragraph of the text. If there were any unclear words, they were explained and clarified as it was important for students to understand the text in order to make a comic book about it. The next step was to determine the division of the text into panels, which are the individual frames of the comic book. The students collectively decided that each paragraph should represent a situation depicted in a single panel. As a result, the six paragraphs were divided into six panels accordingly.

Furthermore, the students were assigned to six groups, with each group consisting of three to four students working on one panel. To facilitate the work process and to avoid overcrowding over one poster, each group was provided with a smaller piece of paper. These individual pieces of paper would later be connected to create a comic book. If the students required assistance, they were provided with guidance in deciding how to adapt the paragraph into the panel. Most of the groups agreed on a key sentence from the text to include in a panel on their own. The remaining text was depicted through an illustration made by using colored pencils and felt-tip pens. The students displayed effective teamwork within their groups. Each member of the group tried to actively contribute to the project. Some students took the role of scanning the paragraph and envisioning the text on the panel, while the others undertook the role of illustrators. Multiple students were involved in coloring the illustration. Due to their prior research on the Laborians in between two sessions, the students arrived with a shared vision on how they should be depicted in the comic book. They made sure that their portrayal remained consistent, regardless of which student was drawing them. Certain students displayed disinterest in the project. They declined to undertake any suggested role. As a result, they were assigned with the responsibility of ensuring

that their group completed the panel within the given time of half an hour. Once the time was up, most of the groups successfully completed their panels. The groups who had not finished their assignment were requested to complete it at home and bring the panels to school for the third session. It is worth noting that, in agreement with their English teacher, it was decided that the students who volunteer would create a PowerPoint presentation to introduce their hometown and school to the foreign students. The details of this presentation will be described in the following text. Unfortunately, due to the time constraints of the projects, this could not have been done during the official meeting.

The third session was especially interesting to the students. They were filled with anticipation, as they looked forward to meeting their eTwinning partners from Georgia. Planning the meeting was challenging due to the time zone difference with Tbilisi, as they are two hours ahead of Karlovac. Furthermore, the class has a two-shift school system, alternating between morning and afternoon shifts. This arrangement made it impossible to schedule a meeting during the afternoon shifts. Finally, a suitable date was agreed upon. The Georgian teacher kindly adjusted to the time constraints of the project, ensuring that Croatian students' timetable was not disrupted. After encountering minor technical difficulties, the Zoom meeting began.

To "break the ice" at the beginning of the meeting, both sides introduced themselves by sharing their names and an interesting fact about themselves. After the introduction, the next part of the meeting involved presenting information about their respective countries and schools. The Croatian students presented first. Two students prepared a PowerPoint presentation that included the map of the Europe, highlighting the distance between Croatia and Georgia. They shared some interesting information about Croatia and Karlovac, concluded with a photography of Grabrik Elementary School (*Image 4*). Following the Croatian students' presentation, it was time for Georgian students to present. Unfortunately, they did not prepare the PowerPoint presentation, instead delivering an oral presentation. They covered basic information about Georgia and Tbilisi. Despite not having a PowerPoint presentation, they effectively conveyed the information.

The final part of the meeting included an open discussion. Both sides had an opportunity to ask questions about the presentations, as well as any other cultural topic. The Croatian students compiled a list of questions to ask the Georgian students about their culture and school before the meeting took place, without seeking assistance from the teacher. Although the students were

initially shy, it did not take long for them to feel more at ease and talk freely. One of the main areas of interest for both sides were the differences in their school systems. They asked questions regarding the number of periods per day, the variety of subjects, the frequency of certain subjects throughout the week, the strictness of teachers, and whether there were any upcoming exams. They also exchanged questions about languages that are spoken in each country, holidays, celebrations, and traditional dishes.

The topic that started a lively discussion among the students was pop culture and media. They were highly interested in learning about the various forms of entertainment that are popular in their respective countries. At this point, there was a shift in the conversation. The students transitioned from discussing Croatian and Georgian culture. Instead, they began exchanging thoughts on popular Western music, celebrities and football players. Western media is what both Croatian and Georgian students consume, therefore, it became evident that this exposure has shaped their interests and experiences.

The atmosphere of the meeting was positive and filled with genuine interest. Students from both sides actively participated in it, showing a sincere curiosity about the experiences of their international peers. It generated excitement among the students who were now anticipating the next and the final meeting in which they will showcase their comic books.

After the meeting ended, all the panels were glued together on the hammer paper.

Exploring Karlovac

Karlovac is a city on four beautiful rivers. Korana, Kupa, Mrežnica and Dobra. Karlovac has *The Star*. It is the oldest part of this city. This city has many old parts, Old city Dubovac is one of them. It is amazing! Karlovac even celebrates its birthday on 13rd of July because it was founded on that date, but in 1579.



Image 4. One of the slides from the Croatian PowerPoint presentation, showcasing students' hometown of Karlovac.

The fourth and the final session took place almost a month after the previous one. The reason for the delay was due to unforeseen circumstances on both the Croatian and Georgian sides, making it impossible to arrange the meeting. However, the meeting eventually took place.

The Croatian students had chosen their spokespersons who were responsible for presenting the comic book. Despite having a physical copy of the comic book in the classroom, the students were advised to take photos of each panel and incorporate them into the PowerPoint presentation (*Image 5*). The purpose of this was to make it easier for the Georgian students to understand and follow the storyline. Prior to the meeting, the students who were presenting rehearsed their lines. It was evident that they were slightly nervous during this practice. The remaining students in the class were supportive and encouraged the presenters, which boosted the confidence in their performance.

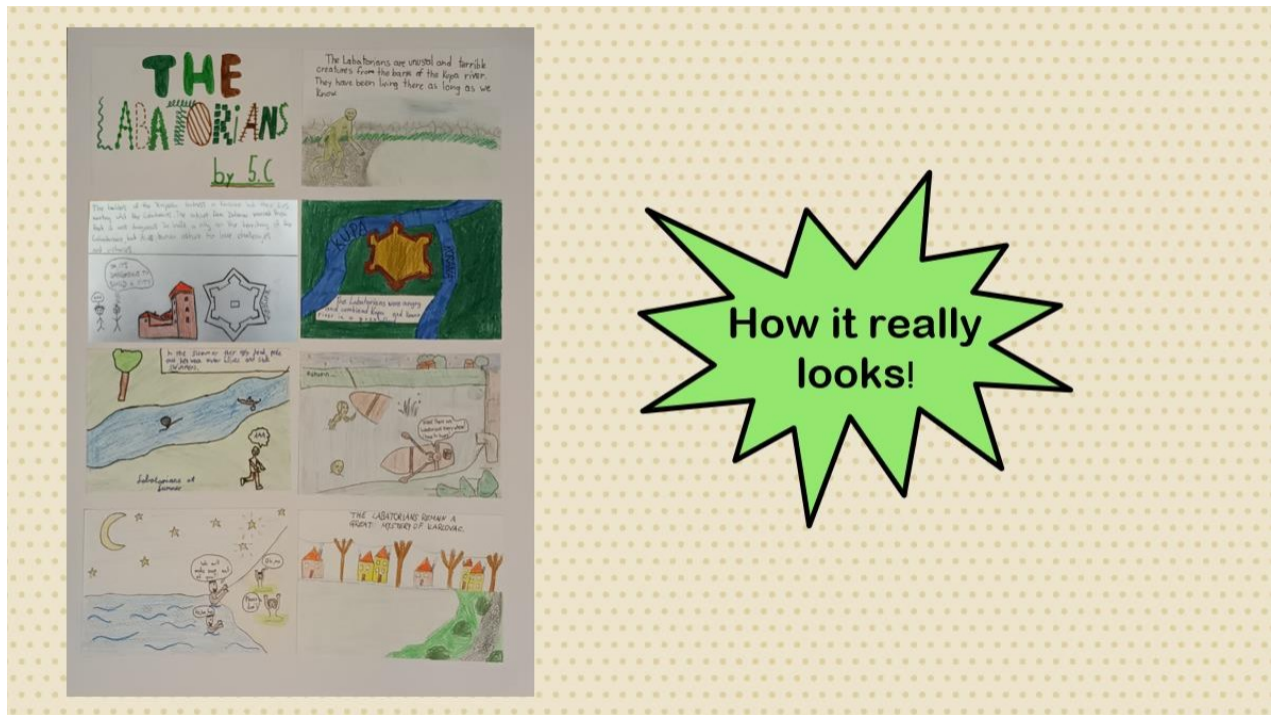


Image 5. The slide from the PowerPoint presentation depicting the authentic portrayal of the comic book's appearance.

During the presentation of the comic book, the presenters did an excellent job. They exhibited confidence and spoke with clarity. It is important to note that in the dedication to sharing a complete legend of the Labatorians, the presenters incorporated additional segments that were not explicitly depicted in the text or speech bubbles shown in the panels. An example of this was evident in the second-to-last picture of the comic book. While the speech bubbles only contained “We will make soap out of you!!!”, followed with “oh, no” and “please, no”, the presenters recognized that this dialogue might not provide sufficient context for the foreign students that are not yet introduced to the legend. Therefore, they took the initiative to orally explain the backstory of this particular panel. They elaborated on how the Labatorians are said to make the soap out of children who do not come home on time, thereby clarifying the unsettling imagery shown in the panel (*Image 6*).

The entire class expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the project. After the presenters finished the presentation, everyone who had contributed shared which part of the comic book they

worked on. The students on the Georgian side of the Zoom meeting showed great interest by asking questions about the Labotorians. They were curious to hear whether the Croatian students thought the Labotorians were real or mythical creatures. Additionally, they expressed admiration for the artistic quality, highlighting the effort put into the creation of it.



Image 6. The panel from “The Labotorians” comic book where the student spontaneously provided information not explicitly written or drawn on it.

On the other hand, the Georgian students took a different approach to this task. They have decided to present three comic books that were created using digital tools. They presented the legend of Surami castle, Katskhi Pillar and Argonauts. Croatian students attentively listened to the presenters, displaying genuine interest in what they were hearing. After the presentations were done, Croatian students actively engaged by asking questions. They were curious to know about

the digital tool which Georgian students used in this project. It was revealed that the digital tool in question was *Procreate*. Croatian students found the use of digital tools fascinating. Some students even made sure to write down the name of it. The Georgian legend about the origin of the Katskhi Pillar was the one that intrigued the most interest among Croatian students. They inquired about whether any of the Georgian students had visited the Katskhi pillar. Furthermore, they were interested to learn its height.

After the discussion of the legends concluded, the students expressed the desire to converse about their respective cultures again. They exchanged questions about their daily lives. Moreover, they expressed interest in the idea of visiting each other's countries. During this phase of the meeting, a few students that had been reserved earlier decided to actively participate and join the conversation. Both sides expressed gratitude for this opportunity. After the meeting ended, the students of 5.C shared that they found this project enjoyable and educational as they learned a lot about their Georgian peers. Some of them even expressed the desire to participate in more projects like *Legends & Culture*.

The final task for the Croatian students was to complete the identical vignette they had filled out at the beginning of the project. Several students expressed confusion regarding the purpose behind repeating it. However, students took more time to contemplate their answers in comparison to the first time. Nobody submitted their answers immediately. Students became more open in their communication, expressing desire to reunite with the students from Tbilisi in the future. Additionally, they expressed their sadness over the conclusion of the project.

4.5. Results and discussion

The analysis included the assessment of students' answers both before and after the eTwinning project. Each of the four answers has a scoring range from zero points to the maximum of four points. Therefore, the students could earn a maximum of sixteen points. The following conclusions are relevant to students' answers before the project.

First testing

The analysis of participants' answers showed that all participants were in the first two stages of intercultural competence as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of the first test

Stage (number of points)	Number of students	Percentage of students
disinterest (0-3)	9	56.25%
defense (4-7)	7	43.75%
minimization (8-11)	/	/
observation (12-15)	/	/
acceptance (16)	/	/

56% of the students were ranked in the stage of *disinterest*. These students exhibited no signs of intercultural competence. Their answers were brief and sometimes not even related to the question. Typical answer for the first question from students in this stage includes statements such as “Petar didn’t know George so he didn’t want to sit with him”. These students failed to perceive the cultural factor within the problem situation. Although some of them acknowledged that George is the new student, they did not elaborate on the cultural aspect that might explain why Petar did not want to sit with him.

A typical response to the second question was that they would feel sad. It appeared to be a socially acceptable response without much elaboration. They did not give much thought to George’s feelings or made an effort to empathize with him. Their interpretation seemed shallow and automatic, as if it were merely a hasty response influenced by boredom with the vignette.

The students in this stage would typically suggest that George should sit with them, once again demonstrating only a superficial acknowledgement of him (the third question). Some

students stated that they might not do anything as they would already be sitting with their friend, therefore displaying passivity towards the situation.

Lastly, they would answer the final question lacking any specific focus on the cultural aspect. Their answers were very general. For instance, one student suggested that the lesson learned is that we don't have to socialize with everyone and that this should be communicated politely in order not to hurt someone's feelings. Another student answered that people shouldn't be judged before we meet them. Although this kind of answer has an intercultural potential, it is vague and fails to address the aspect of diversity.

The remaining 44% of the students were categorized in the *defense* stage. Unlike the students in the stage of *denial*, these students could recognize the conflict between Petar and George. Some of them answered the first question in a manner that indicates creating a distance towards George. For instance, one student mentioned that Petar might perceive George as an intruder in the class. This kind of answer may reflect underlying stereotypes and prejudices. Another student provided a similar answer, suggesting that Petar doesn't know how George will react to him. It implied a negative perception of the new student, suggesting a sense of danger associated with him. Some students proposed that Petar is hesitant to interact with George as he might not know how to speak English with a native speaker. On the other hand, a minority of students offered answers that were associated with higher stages of intercultural development. For example, they acknowledged the fact that Petar was reluctant to sit with George because he had come from a foreign country and spoke a different language. They demonstrated an awareness of the cultural barrier that might have affected Petar's perception of George. These students showed a better understanding of George's feelings in the second question. Some students believed that George felt lonely and carried a sense of guilt, which was an indicator of some sort of prejudice.

Regarding the third question, most of the students expressed their willingness to sit with George. They formulated their responses more considerately, although they were still cautious. However, one response stood out. It demonstrated a level of intercultural competence that was not reflected in the student's final scoring. This particular student expressed willingness to introduce himself to George and initiate a conversation about his background and his life back in the United Kingdom. This participant demonstrated curiosity about meeting George's culture and experiences, which embraces diversity and actively accepts the individual.

While responding to the fourth question, some students from the stage of *defense* provided answers that displayed characteristics closer to the phase of *minimization*. For instance, one student stated that George could be a good person regardless of his background, emphasizing the inclusion in the class by saying that he is now one of the students in the class and therefore shouldn't be excluded. Another student highlighted the importance of initially getting to know a person, regardless of their appearance or the language they speak. They also wrote that opinions should be formed after the initial meeting. This perspective highlighted the importance of meeting and getting to know a person before making judgements.

Although there were some answers that demonstrated a certain level of intercultural competence, none of the students were categorized in the stage of *minimization*. This indicates that, overall, the intercultural competence of the class was notably low. They were not considered to be at the beginning of intercultural learning (Šenjug Golub, 2013). However, the *Legends & Culture* project aimed to change this by fostering the development of this competence.

Second testing

The following information relates to the second testing conducted after the eTwinning project. The results of the second test can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of the second test

Stage (number of points)	Number of students	Percentage of students
disinterest (0-3)	8	53.33%
defense (4-7)	3	20%
minimization (8-11)	4	26.67%
observation (12-15)	/	/
acceptance (16)	/	/

More than 50% of the students were classified in the stage of *disinterest*. Among these students, 30% of them had a final scoring point of 0 points. These students show no signs of development, as they lack the most fundamental level of intercultural awareness. Although the examination was conducted anonymously, it can be speculated that these are the same students who scored between zero and three points in the previous testing. As previously described, the students in this stage were not able to recognize the conflict and they displayed passivity.

Furthermore, 20% of the students were classified in the stage of *defense*. In comparison to the previous testing, there is a lower number of students classified in this stage. It is worth noting that all of these students were ranked with high scores for this stage, which positioned them near the threshold for advancement to the next one. Upon examining their answers, it became evident that all of them received a score of zero points on the same of the four questions. Specifically, more than one student received a score of zero points for the third question, which inquired about their reaction if the described situation were to occur in their class. Their reactions varied between passivity and displaying hidden caution by sitting with George out of politeness. If they had demonstrated more interest in George and his cultural background, they would have passed to the next stage of development. However, one of the students categorized into this stage achieved the maximum number of points for this question, failing to interpret George's feelings in the second question which got him zero points.

Moreover, the last 26% of the students were categorized in the stage of *minimization*. These students minimized the cultural differences, while prioritizing basic human values. In regard to the first question, one of the students answered that Petar might had been scared to converse with George because of his limited proficiency in English, therefore not being able to help him. By analyzing this question, it was evident that George was not seen as a cause of the problem anymore. The focus of the conflict was now an objective factor, Petar's inability to speak English. Others were able to understand that Petar's hesitation towards George could be attributed to either George being a foreigner or because of racial diversity. The focus of the conflict shifted from an objective factor to Petar. The students perceived him as being aware of the cultural differences, which led them to the presence of some sort of prejudice towards George. Although some of the students' answers to the second question did not meet the required level of intercultural competence for the stage of *minimization*, scoring zero to one point, others were in accordance with it. They believe

George felt excluded, which could have negatively impacted his self-confidence, as he might have thought that he must change something about himself. These students understood George's emotional state.

Some students achieved the maximum score on the third question. They explained that they would have sat with George as they valued having friends from other countries or because they felt confident in their English language skills to engage in a conversation and answer George's questions. These two responses showed students' inclination towards inclusivity. They not only expressed a willingness to sit with George but also demonstrated curiosity about his culture. This fosters a positive attitude towards embracing diversity. All the students in this stage scored at least two points on the last question. Answers that are characteristic for this stage include the ones such as: "it doesn't matter where you come from and which language you speak, everyone can be friends with everyone" and that we should put ourselves in someone's shoes in order to see that Petar's behavior was not acceptable. They emphasized the principle of equality. Two answers to this question showed a deeper level of understanding. One student claimed it was better to communicate via Google Translator than to exclude someone because they are from a different country. Another student thought that George had the potential to be an exceptional boy, despite Petar's judgment based on his background. These students were aware of the existence of prejudices. However, they openly criticize such behavior and advocate acceptance and tolerance.

Discussion

From the results of both tests, it is evident that the majority of students are in the less preferred stages of development. In the first test, 100% of the students are in the stages of *disinterest* and *defense*. In the second testing, 73% of the students were found to be in these stages. These findings indicate low levels of intercultural competence. However, the remaining 27% of the students in the second testing are categorized in the stage of *minimization*. Although in the minority, it is evident that some students made progress in terms of intercultural learning.

As a result of these findings, it can be said that the first hypothesis is rejected since the students did not demonstrate a fundamental level of intercultural competence as described by Šenjug Golub (2013) during the initial questioning. On the other hand, the second hypothesis is

supported, as the students did, in fact, demonstrate an improvement in their levels of intercultural competence in comparison to their initial levels, following their participation in the project.

The participants of this eTwinning project displayed a genuine curiosity towards each other's cultures through effective communication. During the course of two online meetings via Zoom the students exhibited a strong rapport with one another which created a positive atmosphere.

It should be noted that this study was conducted on a very small scale with a limited number of participants, making it challenging to draw generalizations. Šenjug Krleža (2020) highlights a potential limitation of the vignette method, proposing that participants' beliefs may not correspond to their actual reactions. As a result, she recommends complementing this method with other research approaches. Additionally, the project itself had certain limitations, in terms of duration and its content. Extending the duration of the process and organizing more meetings with foreign students, possibly including additional tasks related to the legends that would span over the longer period of time, could enhance the levels of intercultural competence. Moreover, the students of 5.C class were not exposed to the cultural aspects of the research, nor were they introduced to intercultural competence as a skill. Incorporating exposure to the existence of this kind of competence throughout the study may also improve students' results. However, this research provides valuable insight into how students of one class from a smaller town perceive diversity on their own, without being hyper-aware of the study's specific focus, thereby offering a realistic assessment of their levels of perception.

CONCLUSION

The students who participated in *Legends & Culture* eTwinning project showed great interest in it, making its execution incredibly effortless. Their compassion, care and genuine interest gave the project a profound sense of purpose. Undoubtedly, they will cherish the memories of it and hopefully have more similar projects in the near future. During the course of this project, the class showed their optimistic nature and curious minds, indicating that it is likely for their intercultural competence to further flourish if they are given the opportunity to collaborate with their European peers using modern technology. Their invaluable contribution is highly appreciated, as it is the very foundation that made this graduate thesis possible.

In this modern age, teachers have an opportunity to develop intercultural competence by embracing eTwinning. This contemporary solution stands in contrast to traditional teaching and learning methods, which may be considered not as stimulating and dynamic, especially in the context of today's fast paced world. Today's learners should not conform to an outdated educational system. Instead, the system must adapt to meet their needs, ensuring students' academic success and growth in a rapidly changing world. Despite potential restrictions in the curriculum, educators may still find innovative ways to integrate technology into their lessons. By doing so, the overall learning experience may be enriched, leading to improved intercultural competence.

The foreign language classroom, in this case of English language, can serve as an ideal setting for implementing eTwinning. Through, for example, collaboration with foreign students on various types of projects, students can not only enhance their ICT skills but also deepen their intercultural understanding. In this case, eTwinning emerges as an excellent platform to use as it offers a secure environment, bringing together teachers from all across Europe who share a common vision of modern education. Through eTwinning, teachers help connect their students with the rest of the world, fostering the sense of shared identity, both the European and global one. Forming this kind of identity is essential for thriving in today's world, therefore, the earlier it starts developing, the better.

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Appendix 1. The vignette used in this research.

U 5.d razred došao je novi učenik. Zove se George, a njegovi roditelji su se doselili iz Ujedinjenog Kraljevstva. George je htio sjediti u klupi s Petrom, no Petar to nije htio.

1. Što misliš zašto Petar nije htio sjediti pokraj Georgea?

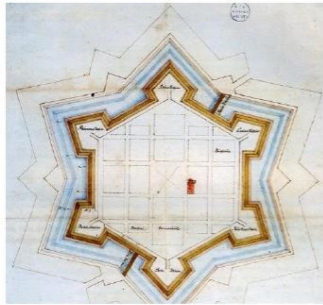
2. Što misliš kako se George osjećao u toj situaciji?

3. Što bi ti učinio/učinila da se to dogodilo u tvom razredu?

4. Što možemo naučiti iz ove priče?

Appendix 2. The Legend of Labotorians.

The Labotorians are unusual and terrible creatures from the banks of the Kupa River. They have been living there as long as we know.



The builders of the Zvijezda fortress in Karlovac had their first encounter with the Labotorians. The natives from Dubovac warned them that it was dangerous to build a city in the territory of the Labotorians, but it is in human nature to love challenges and victories.

As soon as the first shovel was driven into the future foundations of Zvijezda, a large flood stopped the builders. The Labotorians were angry and combined the Kupa and Korana rivers in a great flood. Since then, the people of Karlovac have been dealing with problems caused by the Labotorians.

The Labotorians can be very rude and mean. During the summer, their ugly heads poke out from water lilies and they stalk swimmers. In the autumn, they scare fishermen by rocking their boats.

Worst of all, it is said that the Labotorians come out to the banks of the Kupa River in the evenings. They catch children who haven't come home on time and supposedly make soap out of them.

Has anyone ever see them? The Labotorians remain a great mystery of Karlovac, the city on the four rivers.



Izjava o izvornosti završnog/diplomskog rada

Izjavljujem da je moj diplomski rad izvorni rezultat mojeg rada te da se u izradi istoga nisam koristila drugim izvorima osim onih koji su u njemu navedeni.

(vlastoručni potpis studenta)