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# Cross-Cultural Experiential Learning During the Short-Term Non-formal Educational Activity

Judita Tomaškinová and Ján Tomaškin

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present experiences in the context of a multidimensional approach for educating based on Kolb's experiential learning theory, as explored during the youth exchange project "Empowering youths towards a sustainable future". The skills for cross-cultural learning are becoming increasingly relevant in today's globalized world. The framework to develop skills and to increase cultural awareness used existing intercultural training models: the self-awareness model of training (or "human relations" model), the cultural awareness model, the area training model (the in-country "field training" model) and the intercultural communication workshop (ICW). This approach has cognitive, affective and behavioural goals and is both culturally specific and culturally general. The multidimensional model integrated all the dimensions with the experiential learning cycle. This form of education aimed to improve social relations by fostering cross-cultural learning skills, such as interpersonal skills (CE), information skills (RO), analytical skills (AC), action skills (AE), to provide important opportunities for identifying and critically reflecting on one's own culture and valuing people of different cultures. The training design reflected these essential elements by involving 21 participants (20–28 years old) and 4 leaders of three nationalities (Slovak, Maltese, Lithuanian) during 12 days (14–25 October 2015). A cross-cultural environment exposed each participant (including leaders) to action learning in problem-solving within the international

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community which required understanding other cultures. This paper reports on a questionnaire survey (a pre–post-questionnaire) among project participants using an assessment tool to measure the attainment of international cross-cultural skills through different initiatives (International Cross-Cultural Experiential Learning Evaluation Toolkit). The results show that participants tend to learn from their own experiences through proximate, specific situations. The conclusions that were drawn refer especially to this finding, specifically that those competencies associated with interpersonal skills and building human relationships (CE skills) may be of fundamental importance for successful cross-cultural learning.

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**Keywords**

Cross-cultural learning · Experiential learning cycle · Multidimensional model

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## 1 Introduction

Education for sustainable development (ESD) is an essential tool for achieving a vision of sustainable future that seeks to balance human and economic well-being with cultural traditions and respect for natural resources. ESD is therefore in essence education for the twenty-first century. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, ESD promotes sustainable thinking and acting. Similarly, the mission of Learning for a Sustainable Future (LSF) is to inspire a new generation of responsible citizens by promoting, through education, the knowledge, skills, values, perspectives and practices essential to a sustainable future. In fact, UNESCO established a Commission on Education for the twenty-first century and has repeatedly called for the integration of education, public awareness and training in the context of ESD into all educational programmes at all levels, as well as guidelines for the development of key competences for ESD. The progress has been made in creating Strategy for ESD aims to equip people with knowledge, skills, understanding, attitude and values compatible with sustainable development by UNECE.

The need for sustainable development is clear, and education should play an important role in enabling people to live together in ways that contribute to sustainable development. The development of a sustainable society should be seen as a continuous process of learning and change, involving a variety of actors providing guidance and leadership in formal, non-formal and informal learning. To this end, it calls specifically for the development of a set of categories of competences in ESD that reflect a wide range of learning experiences: learning to know (the learner understands...); learning to do (the learner is able to do...); learning to live together (the learner works with others in ways that...); learning to be (the learner is someone who...). The key competences in ESD described in Strategy for ESD are

not a “minimum standard” to be met by all learners, but rather a goal to which all learners should aspire and should go beyond the basic skills that an individual would have to have (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe 2012).

One of the priorities of this document is to educate learners to work across cultures because we are losing the ability to enjoy “the comfort” of working solely within our home culture because of globalization. Practical cross-cultural experiences occur in many forms: encounters with individuals of different cultures, jaunts to overseas customers or suppliers, short visits to international divisions and long-term immersion in a new host culture have become an expected, even required, aspect of management success (Mintzberg and Gosling 2002). The internationalization of management education and learning means that many partnerships and networks should be established and supported as an important strategy for developing and practicing the key competences for ESD. These could be not only at the local, regional and national levels but also at international levels. This opens a need to develop various skill sets including skills for living and working together with different cultures in the globalized and globalizing world. We need to prepare learners not only for employment in a sustainable economy, but also to have the skills and values that will allow them to live and work with others in ways of integrative thinking and practice (e.g. actively engage different groups across generations, cultures, places and disciplines) and help them clarify their own and others’ worldviews through dialogue, and recognize that alternative frameworks exist. This entails encouraging strong personal development. Learners are more likely to “learn from experience” when they are prepared for the experience, engage in educational activities during the experience and evaluate the experience. Cross-cultural experiential learning provides learners with opportunities to learn with and from people and/or places of cultures different from their own. This form of learning brings the skills, attributes and understandings that are becoming increasingly relevant in education for the twenty-first century and aims to:

- improve social relations by fostering cross-cultural competencies;
- provide important opportunities for identifying and critically reflecting on one’s own culture.

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## 2 Methods and Methodology

A total of 21 participants and 4 leaders who were enrolled in the Erasmus + project “Empowering youths towards a sustainable future”, a project focused on education for sustainable development, participated in this survey. Participants came from various grade levels of education (12% Doctoral degree, 20% Master’s degree, 24% Bachelor’s degree, 44% secondary school finishers). Female participants were predominant (60%), and the following races and ethnicities were represented in the sample: 40% Slovak, 36% Lithuanian, 24% Maltese. Participants’ average age was 26.08 (median = 24, SD = 7.58, CV = 29.09%). One of the most important project

topics was to develop competencies for learning from cross-cultural experiences and help learners to learn with and from people and places of different cultures through cross-cultural experimental learning activities based on Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT). We implemented a multidimensional model based on three aspects (cognitive, affective, behavioural), which integrates all the dimensions with the experiential learning cycle during the everyday short-term non-formal educational activities (12 days, from 14 to 25 October 2015) which took place in Malta. We used as a guide The International Cross-Cultural Experiential Learning Evaluation Toolkit (created by the American Association of Colleges Universities (AACU 2010) which provides materials to help educators to develop assignments that strengthen cross-cultural skills through experiential indoors and outdoors learning activities. As an assessment instrument to determine the level of cross-cultural skills of the participants in our project and to measure skills gained during the project's period, we used pre- and post-questionnaires (at the start and the end of the project activities). The questionnaires were developed to ascertain demographic information: their previous experiences with cross-cultural opportunities, such as study abroad, language study, growing up outside the home culture. The questionnaires also provided opportunities for learners to rank their current cross-cultural activity, for example the frequency with which they watch foreign language films, hang out with students from another culture. There were also items that assessed the other factors that might be related to intercultural skills and awareness, such as languages spoken at home, ethnic origin of parents and national and international travel and activities. After a brief explanation of the questionnaire survey ('pre-post'-questionnaires), the respondents were asked to reflect on what they have learned from the experiences within intercultural meetings and also connect the experience to project content and to other outside experiences during the project period. We also asked them to think critically and examine how the experiences have impacted them and their attitudes towards others. Our final step was to achieve an empirical validation for the impact of the cross-cultural activities on the learner's behaviour as a result of the cross-cultural interactions during the youth exchange. A total of eleven items are rated on a 4-point scale, one indicating "not applicable" and four indicating "had great effect". The instrument has been used in the education field to assess learners' (participants') competences as to what extent participating in project activities (education activities, international mixed group interactions, readings and other project-based activities) had an impact on their behaviour.

After completion of the cross-cultural experiential learning activities (after the end of the international project), only 19 project participants (Slovak and Lithuanian) were asked to participate in an adapted assessment rubric created by AACU for our institutional-level use in evaluating and discussing learner learning for the evaluation of the effect of travelling to another country and not being on one's own culture/environment. We have evaluated parameters for a total assessment rubric of intercultural knowledge and competence, as well as assessed the following elements: openness, cultural worldview and knowledge, general connection of experience to personal growth, connection of cultural experiences to academic context, cultural self-awareness, general transfer of knowledge and skills, effective

teamwork, effective communication. The rubric articulates fundamental criteria for each learning outcome, with performance descriptors demonstrating progressively more sophisticated levels of attainment. A total of seven elements are rated on a 4-point scale (one indicating the lowest rating and four indicating the highest rating and a “0” score (no information) when a rubric element was not observed). For the participant efficacy self-analysis, participants were asked to write down their self-analysis of efficacy change by comparing their pre- and post-questionnaire responses. The following instructions were given to all participants at the end of their personal development learning: add your scores for each subscale of the post-questionnaire and analyse your sense of self-efficacy, especially by comparing your scores from the beginning of your learning and now.

For final evaluations, we used statistics (even the sample size was small (25 and 19 respondents): Descriptive Methods—Summary Statistics ( $M$  = mean,  $SD$  = standard deviation, median,  $cv$  = coefficient of variation), and a paired samples  $t$  test was conducted ( $d.o.f$  = degrees of freedom, the critical value, the absolute value) (software STATGRAPHICS Vers. 5.0).

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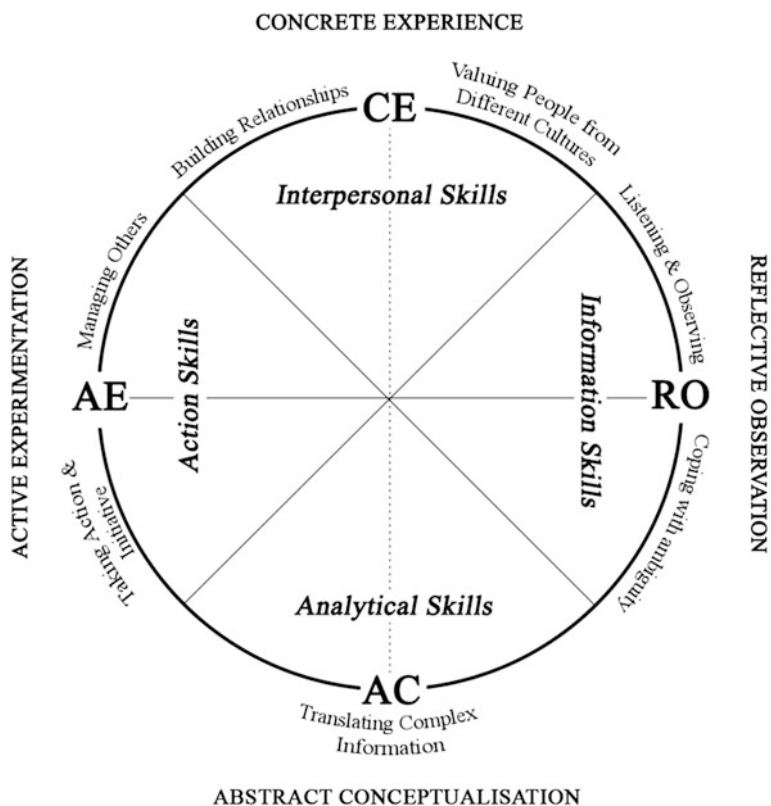
### 3 Theoretical Framework of the Study

Experiential learning is an important approach within the theoretical tradition of adult education. David Kolb’s four-stage model of learning (1984) is regarded as classical and as a foundation for experiential learning (EL). New knowledge, skills or attitudes are achieved through confrontation among four modes of EL. Experiential learning describes “*a holistic process of adaptation to the world*” (Kolb 1984, p. 31). Learners, if they are to be effective, need four different kinds of abilities: concrete experience abilities (CE), reflective observation abilities (RO), abstract conceptualizing abilities (AC) and active experimentation abilities (AE). That is, they must be able to involve themselves fully, openly and without bias in new experiences (CE). CE emphasizes the ability to employ feeling, intuitive understanding of the present reality and sensitivity towards other people’s emotions and values. They must be able to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives (RO). RO emphasizes using reflective understanding to uncover how and why things happen. They must be able to create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories (AC). AC abilities require thinking, analysing and building general theories, and they must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems (AE). AE abilities emphasize actively influencing people and changing situations. AE focuses on practical applications and pragmatic focus on what works (Kolb 1984, p. 30). Each of the four learning abilities relates to a particular set of learning skills. Individuals strong in CE abilities excel at relating to people with an open mind, value interpersonal relations and perform well in unstructured and ambiguous situations (interpersonal skills: relationship-building, leadership, helping and understanding people). Those strong in RO excel at imagining the meaning of situations and ideas, seeing things from

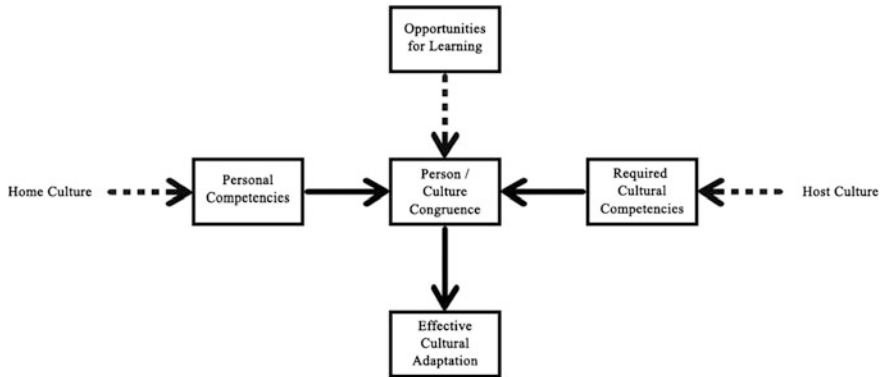
different perspectives and appreciating different opinions (perceptual skills: sense-making, information-gathering and information analysis). They value patience, impartiality and, considered, thoughtful judgment. Individuals with strong AC abilities are good at making systematic plans, manipulating abstract symbols and using quantitative analysis (information integration and technology skills). Those with AE abilities are willing to take risks, to get things done and to take responsibility for accomplishing objectives. Individuals with a strong AE style are good at taking actions to influence their external environment and like to see results (behavioural skills: goal-setting, action and initiative-taking). The relationship between the EL dimensions and their related learning skills is shown in Fig. 1.

We present a person-cultural congruence model of cross-cultural learning in Fig. 2. The model depicts a graphic relationship between culture, competencies, learning and cross-cultural adaptation.

Kolb (1984, p. 38) presents a working definition of learning as a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. The core of his model of EL is a simple description of a learning cycle—how experience is



**Fig. 1** Learning dimensions and skills (based on Kolb's learning styles, 1984)



**Fig. 2** Person—culture congruence model of cross-cultural learning (Yamazaki and Kayes 2014)

translated into concepts, which in turn are used as guides in the choice of new experiences (Kolb 1976, p. 21).

Cross-cultural experiential learning has characteristics in common with experiential education in general. According to Wallace (1977, p. 27), the experiential education will achieve its educational goals to the extent that it is characterized by these four objectives: planned, affective, individual and thoughtfully evaluated. There are, at least, these ways in which cross-cultural experiential learning can be justified for learners:

- learning itself is a cross-cultural encounter;
- cross-cultural experience aids self-development;
- cross-culturally effective persons have characteristics desirable for effective learners in twenty-first century;
- cross-cultural experience leads to global perspectives necessary for global education.

As a result of cross-cultural experiential learning, a learner can begin to gain an attainable global perspective. It means that he/she will have a point of view that takes in facts and interrelationships from all around the world. So for the learner in the twenty-first century, it is necessary to gain a global perspective. Global education is interdisciplinary and is everybody's business.

## 4 Results

Our real main task was to incorporate cross-cultural experiential learning into project education through a multidimensional model that builds from introductory to developmental to intensive experience. We used a hierarchy of intercultural



experiences to direct participants. We used a hierarchy of intercultural experiences to direct participants, it means that the participant had to move from the level of dabbler (trying participants' national food for the first time) to student (taking a history lesson on the Maltese islands), to observer (attending the virtual heritage presentation series during participants' national day/learning about a culture which is not one's own), to friend (knowing international participants from two different nationalities), to participant (immersion in another culture, such as learner in international mixed group).

To explore the impact of the cross-cultural experiential learning on participants' behaviour and development of their skills and knowledge, a paired samples *t* test was conducted. There was a significant difference in scores for the pre-questionnaire ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = 0.30$ ) and the post-questionnaire ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 0.25$ );  $t = -10.06$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , d.o.f = 10. The critical value for *t* with degrees of freedom = 10 and  $\alpha = 0.001$  is 4.587. The absolute value of the calculated *t* exceeds the critical value ( $10.0639 > 4.587$ ), so the means are significantly different (see Table 1). Each item in Table 1 was evaluated separately in order to determine what significance respondents credited to particular expectations or

**Table 1** Comparisons of pre-questionnaire survey and post-questionnaire survey for participant efficacy scale score in the field of learning and expectations for an intercultural experience within the short-term non-formal education activities

	Pre-questionnaire				Post-questionnaire			
	<i>M</i>	Median	SD	cv (%)	<i>M</i>	Median	SD	cv (%)
Growth in interpersonal skills	2.64	3	0.62	24.15	3.8	4	0.48	13.16
Learning to adapt to new situations and surroundings	2.48	2	0.50	20.56	3.92	4	0.27	7.06
Learning and understanding other ways of seeing the world	2.44	2	0.50	20.76	3.56	4	0.70	19.99
Growth in self-awareness	2.32	2	0.47	20.52	3.6	4	0.63	17.93
Intellectual stimulation and development	3.28	3	0.66	20.68	3.84	4	0.37	9.74
Growth in maturity and self-confidence	2.64	3	0.48	18.56	3.48	4	0.70	20.52
Greater understanding of different cultures	3.16	3	0.78	25.32	3.76	4	0.51	13.90
Increased ability to communicate in a foreign language	2.6	3	0.63	24.83	3.2	4	0.89	28.53
Gain a different perspective on mine own culture	2.48	2	0.50	20.56	3.24	3	0.76	24.04
Learn about my country of origin	2.48	2	0.50	20.56	3.28	3	0.66	20.68
Understanding how to interact with people from different cultures	2.64	3	0.49	18.56	3.44	4	0.64	18.91

1 = not applicable; 2 = had no effect; 3 = had some effect; 4 = had great effect

impact of his or her behaviour. During the evaluation, we based on the degrees of the scale, where 1 = not applicable, 2 = had no effect, 3 = had some effect, 4 = had great effect.

In fact, our survey of 25 participants involved in international project activities found that 48% of participants were cooperated with culturally different people.

These results suggest that cross-cultural experiential learning within the project education through a multidimensional model does have a significant positive effect on learners' behaviour, knowledge and skills. However, one-way analyses revealed no significant differences at  $p < 0.05$  for the impact of the cross-cultural activity on the learner's (participant's) behaviour against the independent variables of sex and grade level of their education. The effect of interpersonal skills development on participants had great effect on 84% of respondents, and for 12% had some effect. It had no effect for 4% of respondents.

The followed questionnaire survey was characterized as learners'/participants' interpersonal skills in the field of intercultural knowledge and competence enhancement through travelling to another country and being in another country/environment. Developing a solid foundation of intercultural knowledge and competences through the project activities and travelling abroad seemed to positively affect learners' development in the field of key competences for ESD (openness = open to new perspectives; cultural worldview and knowledge = how culture contributes to one's view of the world; general connection of experience to personal growth = connects cultural experiences to their personal lives and culture to personal growth and development; cultural self-awareness = having insight into own cultural rules and biases; general transfer of knowledge and skills = transfers skills and knowledge learned in one cultural context to apply to another cultural context; effective teamwork = ability to cooperate effectively in an international mixed group, including contributing to team meetings, fostering constructive team climate, responding to conflict; effective communication = ability to communicate effectively across cultures, including the use of relevant technology) (see Table 2).

Many participants (74%) interpreted their high ratings ( $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = 0.29$ ,  $cv = 10.14\%$ ) as the outcome of their knowledge gain through the opportunity to travel abroad and spent some time in the different cultural environment. During

**Table 2** Assessment rubric of two national groups (Slovak and Lithuanian) which travelled to another country

Element	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Median	<i>cv</i>
Openness	2.95	1.09	3	38.31%
Cultural worldview and knowledge	3.21	1.05	4	33.77%
General connection of experience to personal growth	3.58	0.67	4	19.35%
Cultural self-awareness	3.05	0.60	3	20.35%
General transfer of knowledge and skills	2.79	0.61	3	22.61%
Effective teamwork	2.68	0.46	3	17.70
Effective communication	3.32	0.73	3	22.60%

0 = no information, 1 = benchmark, 2 and 3 = milestones, 4 = capstone

**Table 3** Review of Slovak and Lithuanian success factors for expatriate adaptation to a new culture

Group	Sample size	Home	Host	Significant skills and abilities
1.	$n = 10$	Slovakia	Malta	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Building interpersonal relationships</li> <li>– Intercultural sensitivity</li> <li>– Interpersonal flexibility and respect</li> <li>– Patience and tolerance</li> <li>– Abilities to adapt a different physical and cultural environment</li> <li>– Sense of humour and ability to use humour</li> <li>– Willing to communicate</li> <li>– Observing host culture</li> <li>– Listening skills</li> <li>– Working effectively with other people</li> <li>– Making sense of new experiences</li> <li>– Empathy for difference</li> </ul>
2.	$n = 9$	Lithuania	Malta	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Initiative</li> <li>– Self-confidence</li> <li>– Frankness</li> <li>– Sense of humour and ability to use humour</li> <li>– Willingness to communicate</li> <li>– Listening skills</li> <li>– Observing host culture</li> <li>– Working effectively with other people</li> <li>– Interpersonal respect</li> <li>– Social orientation</li> <li>– Self-control under stress</li> <li>– Creativity</li> </ul>

12 days in Malta, participants were engaged in intercultural activities and discussions with local people. Some outdoor and indoor intercultural and heritage education exercises were focused on the national history, traditions, food, songs, dances of the host country (Malta). We implemented “open doors” methodology which means learning about a new culture (understanding a new culture) directly in the cultural and historical environment of the host country. By this method, we provided important opportunities for identifying and critically reflecting on one’s own culture and valuing people of different cultures. We also observed learners in order to compile success factors for expatriate adaptation to a new culture during each activity (see Table 3).

Below are some examples of self-analysis comments:

I did not expect such change [of participant behavior]. I really thought as I was completing the Post questionnaire that my scores would be the same. After I tallied my points, I looked

back at my Pre questionnaire scores and I have increased in all seven elements... I believe the reason I have developed my intercultural knowledge and competences is because I feel I've been given some very useful information and have been in the international mixed group and that the project activities didn't take place in my own country/environment so I could observe different nationalities and Maltese culture, as well as possibly be immersed in cultural traditions that are interwoven into everyday scenarios in Malta yet possibly taken for granted by the "locals"... Male participant, 23 year old with some intercultural experience.

I believe that the reason my development [of participant intercultural knowledge and competences] is so high is that I learned so many concrete things about different cultures and have been able to travel to another country and have learnt "in situ"... This experience provided insights into social situations and traditions that were different from mine. I plan to gain understanding and new perspectives which will lead to the ability to connect more readily on a personal level if/when the opportunity arises again. I look forward to meeting people from different nationalities and learning how they do business, how they live, how they celebrate, and what they strive for in life... Female participant, 21 year old, without any intercultural experience.

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## 5 Conclusion and Discussion

The main focus of this study was to examine whether the multidimensional approach for educating based on Kolb's experiential learning theory and travelling to another country and being in another country/environment had an effect on her/his intercultural learning, and to identify competencies of each evaluated group for successful cross-cultural adaptation in the host country during the short-term non-formal education activities. Our questionnaire survey has shown that participant's personal development effort does have a positive effect on participant's behaviour and gaining new intercultural knowledge was generally positively related to participant development of his/her international cross-cultural skills. The results show that participants tend to learn from their own experiences through proximate, specific situations. The conclusions that were drawn refer especially to this finding, specifically that those competencies associated with interpersonal skills (CE skills), especially with building human relationships and valuing people from different cultures and also with reflective observation (RO skills), especially with listening and observing, may be of fundamental importance for successful cross-cultural learning. Intercultural knowledge and competence is "a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioural skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts" (Bennett 2008; Kolb et al. 2001).

These findings, which are aligned with past research conclusions, illustrate that building relationships with others and caring for, respecting and understanding people of different cultures comprises an important component of intercultural learning. These competencies have been described as developing relationships with locals and colleagues, possessing relational skills or abilities, possessing social orientation, cultural empathy, interpersonal respect, intercultural sensitivity,

extra-cultural openness and greater sensitivity to the needs of others (Hawes and Kealey 1981; Sinangil and Ones 1997; Tung 1998). Boyatzis and Kolb (1991) demonstrated an empirical relationship between the CE mode and the skills related to the clusters of building relationships and valuing people of different cultures. Also, adaptability and flexibility are regarded as important abilities for expatriates' successful adaptation. Hawes and Kealey (1981) have described these competencies as interpersonal flexibility, ability to adapt and cultural flexibility. Rakaiova Survey (2016, in verb.) concluded that there are most required skills (as ability to gain access to and maintain relationships with members of host culture; empathy for difference and sensitivity to diversity; know cultural history and reasons for certain cultural actions and customs) and communication abilities (as a willingness to maintain contact with people even when communication is difficult; initiates and engages in open conversation with friends and colleagues about host culture) which are the most important for adult learners successful cross-cultural adaptation in host culture. There are also significant differences for the positive impact of the short cross-cultural activity (during job-shadowing or internship, from 2 weeks until 1 month) in the host country on the adult learner's behaviour that provides important opportunities to develop competences as valuing people from different cultures and to identify and critically reflect on one's own culture. Also consistent with Rakaiova's (2016, in verb.) view, the findings in this study showed overall higher development of learner intercultural knowledge and skills through concrete experiences and reflective observation in host culture.

Based on our study, we have concluded that the skills most related to successful cross-cultural adaptation are two ELT competencies: CE and RO. They are generally critical for cross-cultural adaptation, regardless of the particular host or home country. The study shows some developments of students' intercultural knowledge and competencies during the short-term cross-cultural experiential learning. Students have developed interaction with people from different cultures, a different perspective on their own culture, adaptation to new situations and surroundings, reflections, other ways of seeing the world, ability to communicate in a foreign language. During the short-term non-formal cross-cultural education process, learners' interest became more oriented to experiential learning and more oriented to openness. There was a general connection of experience to personal growth, and interests became wider. There is reason to believe that inclusion of educational action through a multidimensional approach for educating based on Kolb's ELT has a positive influence on the previously mentioned developments of key competencies in the context of education for the twenty-first century.

A real challenge for educators in the twenty-first century is persuading learners to take advantage of existing cross-cultural learning opportunities. There is no better way to encourage conversion than by requiring cross-cultural experiential learning, inside and/or outside an extraneous culture, for all learners (in each age), since experience not only enlarges the mind but also the heart.

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