

Exploring Pre-Service Teachers' Intercultural Communicative Competence and Global Citizen Learning in a Blended Intensive Program

Raluca POP^{1*} , Anamaria MARC² 

ABSTRACT. This paper aims to expand knowledge on undergraduate students' development of intercultural communicative competence by examining the global citizen learning mindset facilitated by Erasmus Blended Intensive Programs (BIP). The mobility experience aligns with the internationalization of educational practices, enabling undergraduate students to develop global citizenship and thereby enhance their employability. A survey was used as the main research instrument. The study included 17 participants, and the data collected were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively through descriptive statistics offered by Google Forms' built-in tools and content analysis. The findings are similar to those of previous research, indicating the usefulness of participating in projects that provide relevant learning contexts and hands-on experiences, which contribute to the professional development of pre-service teachers.

Keywords: undergraduate level; intercultural communicative competence; education; academic exchange program; global learning; pre-service teachers.

ABSTRACT. Erkundung der interkulturellen kommunikativen Kompetenz und des Global-Citizen-Lernens angehender Lehrkräfte in einem Blended Intensive Program. Dieser Beitrag verfolgt das Ziel, das Verständnis für die Entwicklung interkultureller kommunikativer Kompetenz bei Studierenden im Grundstudium zu vertiefen, indem er den durch Erasmus Blended Intensive Programmes (BIP) geförderten global citizenship-orientierten Lernansatz in den Blick nimmt. Die Mobilitätserfahrung fügt sich in die Internationalisierung

¹ Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

² Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

* Corresponding author: raluca.petrus@ubbcluj.ro



pädagogischer Praktiken ein, die darauf abzielen, Studierende zur Ausprägung globaler Bürgerschaft zu befähigen und damit ihre Beschäftigungsfähigkeit zu steigern. Als primäres Forschungsinstrument wurde eine Umfrage eingesetzt. Die Studie umfasste 17 Teilnehmende, und die erhobenen Daten wurden mittels einer Kombination aus qualitativer Inhaltsanalyse und quantitativer deskriptiver Statistik (unter Verwendung der integrierten Funktionen von Google Forms) ausgewertet. Die Befunde stehen im Einklang mit früheren Forschungsergebnissen und unterstreichen den Mehrwert der Teilnahme an derartigen Projekten, da sie relevante Lernkontexte schaffen und praxisnahe Erfahrungen ermöglichen, die zur professionellen Entwicklung angehender Lehrkräfte beitragen.

Schlüsselwörter: Grundstudium; interkulturelle kommunikative Kompetenz; Bildung; akademisches Austauschprogramm; globales Lernen; angehende Lehrkräfte.

I. Introduction

Due to globalization practices and internationalization of education, tertiary-level students are increasingly encouraged to spend time studying abroad to enhance their academic performance, develop foreign language proficiency, and broaden their intercultural communicative competence to enhance their career opportunities. Various empirical studies have addressed the educational value of academic exchange programs extensively, with numerous studies investigating the development of language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence as outcomes of participation in these programs (Behrnd and Porzelt 2012; Bohman and Borglin 2014; Cleak, Anand, and Das 2016; Pop 2024). Academic exchange programs provide a transformative experience by facilitating a shift in students' frames (Schattle 2008) and an opportunity to broaden perspectives of one's culture and values in contrast to the host culture (Selby 2008). According to DeLong et al. (2011), the time students spend abroad helps them become more proficient in navigating a globalized world and improves their cross-cultural learning and intercultural communicative competence, in addition to their global awareness. These represent strong pillars that define the professional requirements of 21st-century education. In light of globalization and internationalization practices, higher education aims to cultivate cross-culturally competent students (Killick 2020) who engage in a transformative sense of identity and belonging greatly influenced by intercultural interactions (Killick 2012).

Blended Intensive Programs (BIP) within the Erasmus+ framework represent short-term academic exchange programs that combine physical mobility with online courses and are addressed to all types of students from multiple

backgrounds, study fields, and cycles. These may last from 5 to 30 days. The BIP project referenced in this paper, entitled “Active Teaching Methodologies for Bridging Cultures and Building Global Mindsets in Teacher Training” took place in March 2025 at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania (n= 21). The project aimed to develop participants’ ability to integrate, in their teaching, active methodologies that support interactive and collaborative learning, to develop their ability to understand and appreciate diverse cultures within the framework of global citizenship education, and enhance their intercultural communication skills. All participants were enrolled as pre-service teachers in teacher training programs at different partner universities located in Spain, Lithuania, and Poland. Consequently, the BIP project targeted the field of educational sciences.

Even if BIP projects have a brief duration, they can “boost participants’ global awareness, cultural sensitivity and employability skills” (Laine et al. 2025: 455). In addition to being platforms for international collaboration and shared collaborative learning, BIP projects provide an educational richness that, according to Trávníčková et. al (2025: 33), is linked to developing key competencies required for the labor market as well as transversal competencies (analytical thinking, multilingualism). Likewise, alongside the development of expertise in the field of study, BIP projects provide participants with experiential opportunities to enhance essential life skills and soft skills valuable in today’s job market.

This paper broadens the discussion about the way in which short-term academic exchange programs promote global citizen learning and intercultural communicative competence to equip pre-service teachers with pedagogical and procedural competences needed to navigate the ever-changing educational arena. Additionally, the paper provides an opportunity to reflect on BIP projects as experiential learning opportunities that broaden pre-service teachers’ experience by taking diverse roles in a multicultural and multilingual context.

II. Theoretical Framework

The global citizen is a multifaceted construct that is widely encountered in politics, business, economy, or education. Building on the concept of global citizenship perceived as “an attitude or stance towards the world” (Barrie, 2004: 269), Lilley et. al. (2014: 75) indicate “responsibility for a moral stance on human dignity, respect and concern for issues that impact global society”. A more recent perspective on global citizenship in the field of education has been addressed by Mercer et. al (2023), indicating the skills teachers and students should demonstrate in a fast-changing modern world: collaborative skills, critical thinking, intercultural competence, emotional self-regulation and wellbeing, and digital

literacies. These should be recognizable attributes in teachers and students acting as global citizens. Additionally, it is salient that the concept of the 'global citizen' is closely linked to Global Citizenship Education (GCED). UNESCO (2014) describes GCED as an educational approach that fosters respect for diversity, empathy, open-mindedness, and an appreciation of different perspectives and opinions.

The theoretical foundations of the present research lie at the intersection between several approaches to teaching and learning: Global Citizenship Education (GCED), Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and Experiential Learning (EL). The argument in favor is that a BIP project connects students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to collaborate toward analyzing different educational issues and attaining various learning outcomes. CRT regards cultural differences as a positive asset of the learning context. From this perspective, CRT is according to Gay (2018) the practice of "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (2018: 36). Various parameters define EL. Still, for our BIP project, the most suitable definition is given by Beard and Wilson (2018), who suggest that "the experience of learning has potential for the transformation of the self" (2018: 12) as an outcome of the constant interactions between inner and outer worlds.

In this line of thought, CRT supported our BIP project to acknowledge diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, while the EL provided participants with hands-on educational contexts related to global challenges such as accessibility and differentiation. Due to its international format with participants from four universities abroad, these frameworks mutually reinforced one another in our BIP project by supporting students in developing their intercultural competence, social responsibility, and collaborative skills.

Therefore, an overarching concept governing all three approaches listed above is the Intercultural Competence (IC) model proposed by Deardorff (2009). This is a process-oriented model grounded in four pillars essential for developing intercultural competence: attitudes (respect, openness, curiosity), knowledge (deep cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness), skills (listening, observing, interpreting), and desired outcomes (adaptability, flexibility, appropriate communication in intercultural contexts). The BIP project sought to strengthen participants' intercultural competence, as well as acknowledging that IC implies a lifelong process that cannot be fully achieved through short-term mobility alone.

III. Methodology

III.1. Purpose of the study

This research highlights the multifaceted benefits of blended intensive study-abroad programs and aims to explore how participation in an Erasmus BIP contributes to intercultural competence and global mindset development. The study can be relevant for universities designing short-term mobility programs.

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do participants perceive the intercultural learning opportunities offered by the BIP project?
2. What aspects of the program have contributed most to engaging in global citizenship learning?

III. 2. Research Design

The research was conducted in March 2025. A mixed-method approach was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection to provide a wider perspective on respondents' views. The Google Forms questionnaire was given to participants on the last day of the project. Given the reduced number of respondents (n=17), the findings cannot be generalized. Still, the research is valuable for the qualitative analysis of the respondents' views about the intercultural learning opportunities offered by the project.

III.3. Participants and Procedure

The target group comprised undergraduate students (n= 21) enrolled in teacher training programs at four international universities from abroad. A total of 17 respondents provided valid answers. The survey was written in English. Responses were anonymous. Table 1 indicates respondents' profiles:

Table 1. Participant's profile

Participants	N	%
Age		
20	4	23.5%
21	4	23.5%
22	4	23.5%
23	4	23.5%
25	1	5.9%

Participants	N	%
Gender		
Female	13	76.5%
Male	4	23.5%
Country of origin		
Spain	9	52.9%
Poland	5	29.4%
Lithuania	3	17.6%
Foreign language competence		
English: Advanced level	6	
Intermediate level	11	
French: Beginner level	7	
Intermediate level	1	
Italian: Beginner level	1	
Intermediate level	7	
Romanian: Beginner level	6	

III.4. Research Instruments

The questionnaire comprised 19 items with a mix of close-ended (multiple choice, checkboxes or Likert scale) and open-ended questions organized into five main sections: Section 1 - Demographic details and respondents' profile (age, gender, linguistic competence, country); Section 2 - Contact with other cultures (frequency of travelling abroad); Section 3 - Openness, curiosity, and respect for difference; Section 4 - Insights into the BIP project. The quantitative data obtained were analyzed using Google Forms' built-in tools. The qualitative data were processed through a thematic conceptual analysis linking the qualitative answers to intercultural competence, global citizenship education, and experiential learning.

IV. Results

IV.1. Quantitative results

The majority of the respondents are females. The age range is between 20 and 23 years old, which is typical for undergraduate mobility programs. Students came from four different countries, representing the international mix intended by the BIP project. The multilingual profile indicates strong readiness

for intercultural engagement. This diversity supports fertile ground for intercultural learning.

As concerns frequency of travel abroad, most students reported traveling several times a year or once every six months. Most of them (88.2%) have engaged in travel related to studies, holidays (70.6%), music concerts (29.4%), visiting relatives (23.5%), and volunteering (17.6%). Respondents' answers were gathered through a checkbox item. Therefore, the total exceeds 100%. Findings suggest a generally internationally oriented student group that has often interacted with people from other cultures. Participants indicate that they have travelled abroad for a short-term period of 2-10 days (88.2%), 10-20 days (23.55%), 20-30 days (5.9%), or for several months (17.6%). Respondents' answers were gathered through a checkbox item. Therefore, the total exceeds 100%.

When in contact with a new culture, respondents observe first of all the food (100%), the traditions (82.4%), the history (70.6%), and the arts (64.7%), which represent the visible dimension of culture. A new cultural context may be difficult to comprehend due to language barriers. Additionally, Schartner and Cho (2017) suggest that a lack of experience in interacting with multicultural groups can negatively impact students' learning experiences and social contact abroad. Therefore, having in mind this language barrier, respondents were asked to indicate whether they generally feel anxious about travelling to a country whose language they don't know. While 35.3% don't mind the language barrier, 64.7% have experienced varying degrees of anxiety (35.2% to a small extent, 23.5% to a medium extent, and 5.9% to a great extent).

The contact with a new culture "is a transformative experience as it allows one to see the world from an alternative perspective" (Pop 2024: 109). But such a transformative experience can also be a source of anxiety. Respondents were asked to indicate to what extent a new cultural context can be a source of anxiety to them: 35.3% are not at all anxious, 29.4% are slightly anxious, 23.5% feel moderately anxious, while 11.8% feel very anxious. They enjoy travelling abroad (58.8%) because they can meet new people (58.8%) and experience a new culture (82.4%).

Respondents demonstrate awareness that by interacting with other cultures, they have the opportunity to understand how others care for the environment (47.1% agree and 35.5% strongly agree) and care for the well-being of all (52.9% agree and 35.5% strongly agree). These are recognizable markers of the global citizen learning mindset.

As intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes are elements that form the pillars of intercultural communicative competence, respondents' answers provided insights into each category. As the adaptability to new social norms specific to a certain culture is regarded, most students agreed (52.9%) and

strongly agreed (47.1%) that they practice adaptability strategies. Communication is a significant pillar in addressing language barriers when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. The majority of the respondents indicated that they don't find intercultural communication difficult. Therefore, only 11.8% of the respondents struggled with issues concerning this aspect. As cultural knowledge is concerned, the majority of respondents (88.2%) indicate that they have acquired factual information about Romanian culture and about other cultures present during the BIP (70.5%).

There was a strong agreement that participants enjoyed taking part in the BIP project (82.4% strongly agreed and 17.6% agreed), and 76.5% are considering keeping in contact with the other international students they have met in Cluj-Napoca. Communication with students from different cultures was highly effective (88.2%), while the remaining respondents (11.8%) considered it fairly effective. Collaboration with other participants in the BIP project was highly effective (88.2%), or fairly effective (11.8%). Collaborative skills and well-being are also attributes of global citizen education. Building on this idea, we have asked respondents if they have offered their help to BIP colleagues from other cultures. There was a strong agreement (70.5%) on providing help.

IV. Qualitative results

The thematic conceptual analysis linked the qualitative answers to the main concepts guiding the theoretical framework: intercultural competence, culturally responsive teaching, global citizenship education, and experiential learning. Participants' statements are showcased below, in word-for-word citation:

1. Concepts linked to Intercultural Competence and Culturally Responsive Teaching

1.1 Attitudes of openness, curiosity, and respect for difference:

[Meeting new people and cultures is always welcome]

[I have learned a lot from the cultures of my partners]

[I appreciated... talking with students from other countries about our cultural differences and mindsets]

Likewise, participants demonstrated willingness to engage with cultural differences and demonstrated empathy, curiosity, and openness.

1.2 Intercultural knowledge linked to cultural understanding

[Getting to know different types of educational systems]

[We had a lot of occasions to talk about our cultural differences]

Respondents express awareness of cultural diversity and understanding of diverse educational systems.

1.3 Communicative skills

[The bonding with the other students...]

[Teachers explained in another language that was not their mother tongue]

The comments showcase the development of intercultural communicative strategies across cultures.

2. Concepts Linked to Global Citizenship Education

2.1 Sense of belonging to a global community

[Meeting my Polish, Spanish, Lithuanian and Romanian friends in a future BIP]

[I'll always be grateful to the community... I would definitely say yes to another BIP]

Participants express a connection beyond national borders and lay the foundation for community building.

2.2 Appreciation of cultural diversity

[Learning about cultures, incredible friendships I have made]

[Being able to explore more of Cluj, visits to museums]

[Talking about our country, cultural differences and mindsets]

[We felt welcomed by the university and participants]

The word-for-word transcripts envisage intercultural appreciation and inclusive global citizenship characterized by diversity.

3. Experiential learning

[Talking with students from other countries]

[Visits to museums and around the city]

Students engaged in real-life intercultural interactions that offered hands-on experiences essential for learning through doing.

V. Discussions

Students consistently valued meeting international peers, engaging in cross-cultural groupwork, and learning about other cultures. There was high agreement that the BIP experience expanded their worldview and made them more aware of values different from their own. The majority of the respondents

indicated that they don't find communication across cultures difficult. Therefore, only 11.8% indicated struggles with this aspect, which showcases their adaptive skills.

The quantitative and qualitative findings complement each other. Data indicate high-perceived growth in intercultural awareness, communication strategies, and open-mindedness. Real-life interactions (groupwork activities and shared accommodation) were key contributors. The learning environment created by the BIP increased curiosity and engagement with other cultures. The visits to various museums and the guided sightseeing in the city have developed participants' intercultural knowledge. Therefore, in connection with the first research question, "How do participants perceive the intercultural learning opportunities offered by the BIP project?" findings indicate that the Erasmus BIP successfully created meaningful intercultural encounters. Short-term mobility can effectively foster intercultural competence, especially when combined with structured activities and international group work.

The interaction with students and teachers from other cultures has enhanced participants' reflection on ethical, cultural, and global dimensions. Participants have provided help to one another, cared for the well-being of others, and discussed educational topics from the perspective of Global Citizen Education. Therefore, the second research question, "What aspects of the program have contributed most to engaging in global citizenship learning?" could comprise both formal and informal activities conducted throughout the BIP project. Short-term mobility did not hinder learning as students highlighted immersion and hands-on experiences as strong drivers of learning.

One limitation of this research refers to the small number of participants. A larger participant sample, as well as research on long-term mobility stays or longitudinal studies, may be useful in depicting awareness of cultural diversity and understanding of educational systems.

VI. Conclusions

A diversified composition of participants and a combination of online and in-person teaching support cultural appreciation and learning about others. As such, our BIP project, placed in the context of higher education, has diversified the educational experience of participants with a focus on intercultural competence and global citizen learning. The study provides insights into the potential of blended intensive programs (BIP) to engage in international collaboration and support the internationalization of education.

REFERENCES

- Barrie, S. (2004). "A research-based approach to generic graduate attributes policy". *Higher Education Research & Development*, 23(3), 261-275.
Doi: 10.1080/07294360420000235391
- Beard, C., Wilson, J. P. (eds.) (2018). *Experiential Learning. A Practical Guide for Training, Coaching and Education*, 4th edition. USA, UK, India: Kogan Page.
- Behrnd, V., Porzelt, S. (2012). "Intercultural Competence and Training Outcomes of Students with Experiences Abroad". *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 36 (2): 213-223, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.04.005>
- Bohman, D., Borglin, G. (2014). "Student Exchange for Nursing Students: Does It Raise Cultural Awareness? A Descriptive, Qualitative Study." *Nurse Education in Practice* 14: 259–264. Doi: 10.1016/j.nepr.2013.11.006.
- Cleak, H., Anand, J., Das, C. (2016). "Asking the Critical Questions: An Evaluation of Social Work Students' Experiences in an International Placement." *British Journal of Social Work* 46: 389–408. Doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcu126.
- DeLong, M. et al. (2011). "Cultural exchange: Evaluating an alternative model in higher education." *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 15 (1), 41–56.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315309334619>
- Deardorff, D. (2009). "Synthesizing conceptualizations of intercultural competence: A summary and emerging themes". In Darla Deardorff (ed.), *The Sage handbook of intercultural competence*, (pp. 264-270). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally Responsive Teaching. Theory, Research and Practice*. Amsterdam, New York: Teachers College Press.
- Killick, D. (2020). "Beyond competencies and silos: Embedding graduate capabilities for a multicultural globalizing world across the mainstream curriculum". *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 15(1): 27-35.
- Killick, D. (2012). "Seeing ourselves-in-the-world: Developing global citizenship through international mobility". *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 16(4), 372-389. Doi: 10.1177/1028315311431893
- Laine I, Pirrone G, Phan KHQ, Milotta M, Vääänen J, Hagen B. (2025). "Integrating real-world entrepreneurship with international learning: insights from a blended intensive programme". *Journal of International Education in Business*, vol. 18 (3): 438–461. Doi: 10.1108/JIEB-08-2024-0112
- Lilley, K., Barker, M., Neil, H. (2014). Educating global citizens in business schools. *Journal of International Education in Business*, vol. 7 (1): 72-84.
Doi: 10.1108/JIEB-06-2012-0010
- Mercer, S., Hockly, N., Stobart, G. & Lorenzo Galés, N. (2023). *Global Skills: Creating Empowered 21st Century Learners*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://projectes.xtec.cat/internacional/wp-content/uploads/usu1767/2022/02/oup-expert-global-skills.pdf>

- Pop, R. (2024). Intercultural Communicative Competence: A Case Study on Academic Exchange Programmes. *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Philologia*, 69(4), 97–116. <https://doi.org/10.24193/subbphilolo.2024.4.04>.
- Schartner, A, Cho, Y. (2017). “Empty signifiers’ and ‘dreamy ideals’: perceptions of the ‘international university among higher education students and staff at a British university.” *Higher Education*, 74(3), 455-472.
- Schattle, H. (2008). *The practices of global citizenship*. Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Selby, R. (2008). Designing transformation in international education. In V. Savicki (Ed.), *Developing intercultural competence and transformation: Theory, research, and application in international education* (pp. 1-12). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Trávníčková, H, Purk, J., Löhr, A. (2025). Preparing University Students for the Labor Market Differently: Lessons from the Blended Intensive Program (BIP), *ACC Journal* 31 (B): 33-42. DOI: 10.2478/acc-2025-0008
- UNESCO (2014), “Global citizenship education: Preparing learners for the challenges of the twenty-first century”, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000227729>