

Selected Paper of 9th World Conference on Learning, Teaching and Educational Leadership (WCLTA-2018) 26-28 October 2018, Quality Hotel Rouge et Noir Congress Center, Roma, Italy

## Language as a social phenomenon in a global context: Implications for teaching practice

**Vlaho Kovacevic\***, University of Split, Livanjska ul. 5, 21000 Split, Croatia.

**Marin Spetic**, University of Split, Livanjska ul. 5, 21000 Split, Croatia.

**Marko Pleslic**, University of Split, Livanjska ul. 5, 21000 Split, Croatia.

### Suggested Citation:

Kovacevic, V., Spetic, M. & Pleslic M. (2018). Language as a social phenomenon in a global context: Implications for teaching practice. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences*. [Online]. 5(3), pp 173–182. Available from: [www.prosoc.eu](http://www.prosoc.eu)

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Jesus Garcia Laborda, University of Alcala, Spain

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### Abstract

It is of great importance to study languages within the framework of social sciences. The language not only connects but also separates people, which depends on (the lack of) knowledge of the elements of language and the social context in which language is spoken. Today's communication is largely intercultural, implying the need for a competent interaction with members of other (sub) cultures, within or outside the society in which we live. Within the present pilot study, we have analysed assessments given by Croatian university professors of languages in terms of their competence to discuss globalisation, the development of intercultural competence within language teaching, the interest of students for learning languages as well as the position of language and communication group of subjects in the educational system and in society. The results obtained point to the importance of transferring intercultural competence and a favourable self-assessment of teacher engagement on this issue.

**Keywords:** Education, globalisation, intercultural competence, language, sociology.

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\* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Vlaho Kovacevic**, University of Split, Livanjska ul. 5, 21000 Split, Croatia.  
E-mail address: [vkovacevic@ffst.hr](mailto:vkovacevic@ffst.hr)

## 1. Introduction

Language presents the foundation of human socialisation. Language acquisition and usage are the prerequisites for society development. As an instrument of articulated speech, language differentiates humans from animals whose communication does not exceed the limits of emotional speech (Ilić, 1980). On contrary, language is susceptible to changes being the most important transmitter of culture, values, norms and identities (Gvozdanic, 2010). In addition, language develops under the influence of society, that is, it is not a precisely defined entity with a unique history or a closed set of linguistic properties (Kordic, 2010, p. 52). Linguistic changes may limit or increase the ability of languages to express cultural content, thoughts and feelings (Jezic, 2014, p. 31), and one of the newer (and more productive) debates concerns the influence of globalisation and the prevalence of English as a *lingua franca* over other languages it comes in contact with.

Although being one of the most significant social phenomena, language was rarely a subject of systematic sociological interest. The classics of sociology periodically noticed its importance when dealing with other issues. Marx considered language as an expression of practical consciousness, Durkheim emphasised that the classification of social facts was possible on the basis of language, whereas Bourdieu associated the distinctiveness of identities of different social groups with language variations, pointing to distinctive habitus based on the specific skills, aspirations and practices of these groups (Heritage, 2006, p. 322). Systematic engagement in the social roles of language can be linked, for example, with the analysis of conversation as a methodological approach within microsociology (ethnomethodology), exploring the construction of social reality through conversations (e.g., how people communicate when joking, apologising, threatening and so on; Bakker, 2007, pp. 2534–2535).

Language changes the present-day world, nations and human lives due to the growth of communication at local, national, regional and supranational levels (Sun, 2013, p. 35). In this process, the English language imposed as an instrument of globalisation (the global language), which prevails in business communication and on the Internet as the most popular communication tool. Globalisation has become a popular term in political, economic, technological and scientific (thus sociological) discourse. Abercrombie, Hill & Turner (2006, p. 167) point out that globalisation makes world increasingly homogeneous due to the contact among cultures and the increase in movements/traffic of people, information and goods, enabled by the development of technology for 'time and space compression' (information and communications technology (ICT), traffic systems and so on). The question is how linguistic changes (the spread of communication in English and the increase of Anglicism in other languages) and changes in general affect teaching practice, which necessarily reflects social changes and preparation (socialises) for life with other people. More specifically, how does the growth of human contacts on a global level influence language teaching?

Knowledge is taken as one of the fundamental indicators of competitiveness and pre-conditions of social development (Popovic, 2017, p. 74). The European Union emphasises the importance of communication in both mother tongue and foreign languages, which is one of the key competences for successful lifelong learning (along with mathematical, scientific, technological, digital and other competences). In this sense, competent communication (which should be the outcome of language teaching) includes 'creative interaction, critical and constructive dialogue with the awareness of impacts of language on others, as well as respect for cultural differences and interest in intercultural communication' (Alfirevic, Relja & Popovic, 2016, p. 15). Consequently, successful language teaching is related to the concepts of *intercultural competence* and *intercultural communication*, that is, language learning should not be separated from learning about culture and its other elements. Communication with other cultures (the so-called intercultural communication) is becoming more common even within the same society due to immigration, differentiation of work, family, leisure and other spheres, as well as the fragmentation of human identity (Tomic-Koludrovic & Knezevic, 2004). Intercultural competence includes cognitive, affective and behavioural components, that is, various knowledge, skills and characteristics, such as knowledge of general culture and diverse cultures, curiosity,

cognitive flexibility, motivation, openness, communication, listening and problem-solving skills, compassion and ability to gather information (Dragas, 2013, p. 19).

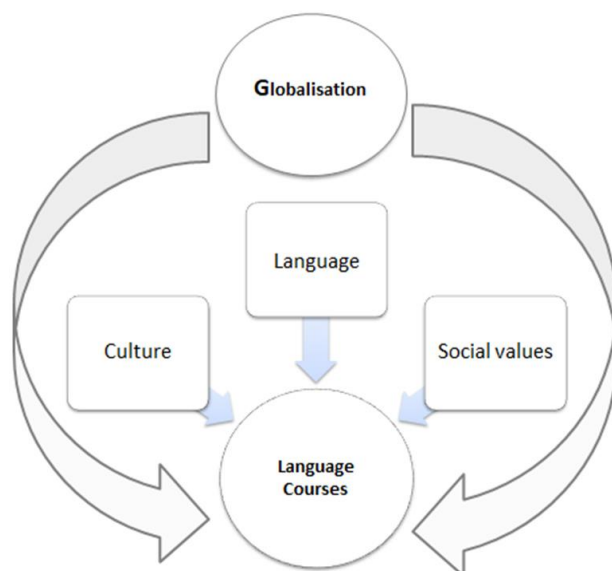
In *The Sociology of Language Teaching and Learning*, Bhushan (2011) points out that language teachers should link the knowledge of a language with the social context in which the language is spoken, not only because of successful communication of the students who will use the language, but also because of various contextual factors, such as the social status of language and its instrumental value, affect the motivation for learning. Therefore, knowledge of social sciences plays an important role in teaching language, positively affecting the quality of the curriculum and language practice of a particular community (Bhushan, 2011, p. 309). It is also necessary to take into account the adaptation of teaching methods and content to the cultural context. This is in line with the point of view of the so-called *transformationalists* according to which globalisation is a complex process that takes place in interaction with the local level. Yet, this process is not uniformed or necessarily positive; therefore, the same modes of work do not provide equal results everywhere (Block, 2004, p. 756; Milardovic, 2004, p. 155).

In addition to sociological knowledge in general, language experts find studies on teaching languages very useful, as they provide an insight into intercultural topics within concrete teaching practice. This study presents the results of one of such studies. We were interested in how teachers of linguistic and communication group of subjects assess the importance of promoting openness to other cultures and their engagement in such issues, how they assess student interest for languages and the role of linguistic and communication group of subjects within today's educational system and society.

As this research was carried out on the territory of the Republic of Croatia, it is necessary to point to the global processes that have affected Croatian society for decades in terms of language issues. English language has been taught from pre-school education, through regular and high education to lifelong learning. Within business communication, knowledge of this language is often a pre-condition for getting a particular job (communication, research, and so on). Young people increasingly use Anglicism such as 'sorry', 'cool', 'anyway', 'whatever' and so on (Pasalic & Marinov, 2008, p. 255). Bearing those in mind, we asked ourselves if the worry about the status of Croatian due to the growing influence of English is justified. Our answer is identical to the claims of those authors who consider it unjustified. There are several reasons for this. Language is a source of identity, a guardian of social memory and a pre-condition for socialisation. Although around 25 languages disappear on a daily basis worldwide (currently there are about 5,000 living languages), including some of the small organic Croatian idioms; yet, preserving our language enables preservation of our culture, mediated for centuries by language (Bozanic, 2014). Furthermore, Hersak (2001, p. 191) points out that, within the 'aureole of mutual intelligibility' model, Croatian language is well understood by approximately 30 million people (the entire South Slavic region), while the outer edge of the aureole includes a much larger number of speakers who understand this language to some extent. One of the possible advantages of Croatian language is based on the more efficient use of that aureole—whether through business relationships or acquaintances, or through private ones. In addition, Croats learn more easily other Slavic languages, which is especially important in case of the need for working knowledge of these languages as a prerequisite for successful communication. Finally, by promoting serious learning of Croatian from the early age, accompanied by understanding of its structure, we incite the motivation for successful learning of other languages and form a prerequisite for their better understanding, which is inevitable for global contacts today.

## **2. Methodology and sample**

The survey method employed here was polling, carried out at the beginning of 2017, based on a closed question questionnaire. The research objective was to consider the impact of globalisation processes on teaching the linguistic and communication group of subjects within the Croatian educational system, through culture, understanding of the roles of language and promoted values (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Conceptual research scheme**

The sample included university teachers of language and communication group of subjects, working during 2016/2017 at departments that educate future primary and secondary teachers within the field of social sciences and humanities (Table 1). As this was the *pilot study*, the planned sample should have included 120 teachers. In contrast, the realised sample included 47 respondents, which is common for online surveys.

The research objective was realised on the basis of responses that can be considered indicative. Research questions were tested, showing the need for further research on a larger sample. This would also be of particular benefit to the assessment of variables about which the respondents in the pilot phase were indecisive.

As this was the initial phase of the research, hypotheses that would have been tested by statistical significance tests were not set. However, we started from the following assumptions that: Respondents believed they were competent enough for discussing globalisation issues, they considered the development of intercultural competence through language teaching importance, they thought students were interested in language learning and that languages were base for the development of today's individuals.

The structure of the sample is shown in Table 1. It shows us the following:

1. most of the respondents were women, which is in line with feminisation of higher education, especially in social and human sciences (Women and Men in Croatia, 2017)
2. middle-aged persons prevailed
3. the respondents worked at a large number of institutions (most at the University of Zadar)
4. the respondents included teachers of different languages (mostly Croatian, followed by English and German)

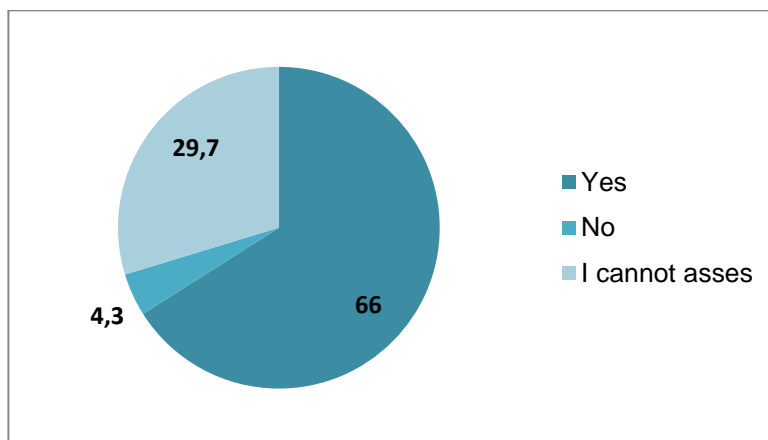
These characteristics show heterogeneity of the sample, which is in favour of the quality of the responses obtained.

**Table 1. Structure of the sample**

		<i>f</i>	Percent (%)
Sex	Male	7	14.9
	Female	40	85.1
Age (years)	25–35	4	8.5
	36–45	25	53.2
	46–55	10	21.3
	56–65	8	17
Name of the institution	FOOZ Osijek	4	8.5
	Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek	5	10.6
	Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split	3	6.4
	Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb	9	19.2
	Center for Croatian Studies	2	4.3
	University of Pula	5	10.6
	University of Zadar	11	23.4
	Faculty of Primary Teacher Education in Zagreb	4	8.5
Language the respondents teach	No response	4	8.5
	Croatian	19	40.5
	English	9	19.1
	German	5	10.6
	Italian	3	6.4
	French	2	4.3
	Spanish	1	2.1
	Russian	2	4.3
	Latin and Greek	1	2.1
No response	5	10.6	

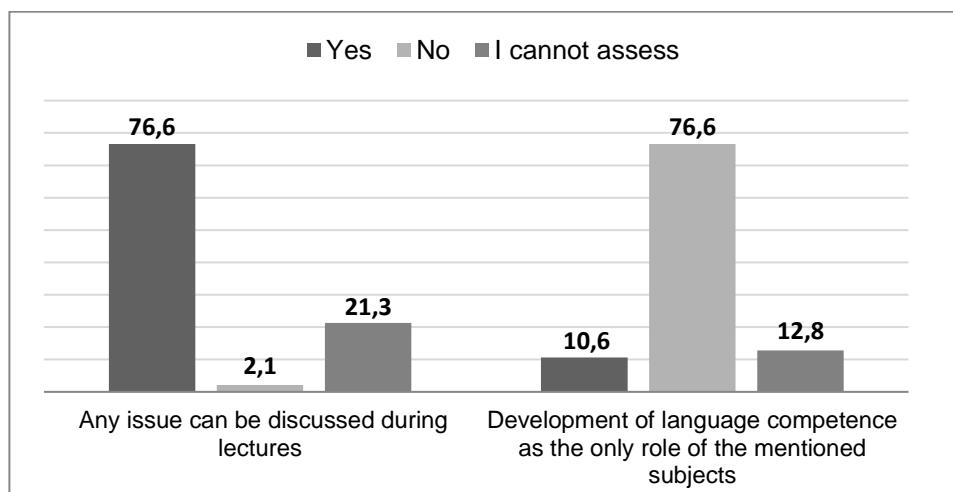
### 3. Results

The majority of the respondents felt competent enough to discuss globalisation issues, which is very important for successful language teaching. Only 4.3% of them considered themselves incompetent with regard to this topic, while about one third could not assess whether they were competent or not (Figure 2). Most respondents informed themselves about globalisation topics—27.8% of them often, 59.6% sometimes, while 10.6% said almost never. As one third of teachers could not assess their competence to discuss globalisation issues, it would be interesting to compare these results within a larger sample. Such inability to assess may be due to the wide concept of globalisation, which includes the political, techno-economic and cultural spheres, as well as various disputes over the beginning, the effects and the strength of globalisation, the potential dominance of the West in this process, and so on (Abercrombie et al., 2006; Giddens, 2002). It is also possible that most of the respondents overlooked the globalisation background within the various topics they were exposed to, that is, they probably did inform themselves about the topics of globalisation but they were not aware of it. Globalisation has become an implicit part of our lives, something self-explanatory, which often we are not fully aware of.



**Figure 2. Being competent to discuss globalisation issues (%)**

The respondents showed relative agreement on the role of linguistic and communication subjects. Most of them (76.6%) believed that any issue could be discussed during lectures, and they did not see the development of language competence as the only role of the subjects they taught (76.6%) (Figure 3). As in the previous case, a large percentage of respondents could not assess whether any topic could be addressed within the language and communication subjects, which should be analysed in further researches.



**Figure 3. The role of linguistic and communication subjects (%)**

Only 4.2% of respondents believed that linguistic and communication subjects were not the key to the success of today's development, which is in accordance with the point of view of key competences for lifelong learning (Figure 4). Furthermore, even half of the respondents argued that linguistic and communication subjects should be of the utmost importance within today's educational system, while only 12.8% argued the opposite. Notwithstanding the importance of language learning, we should emphasise the importance of other subjects for life in the global society. Probably, such high percentage of those who consider the linguistic and communication subjects to be the most important relates to the teachers of these subjects. However, one third could not fully assess the importance; therefore, the variable should be analyzed on a larger sample of respondents.

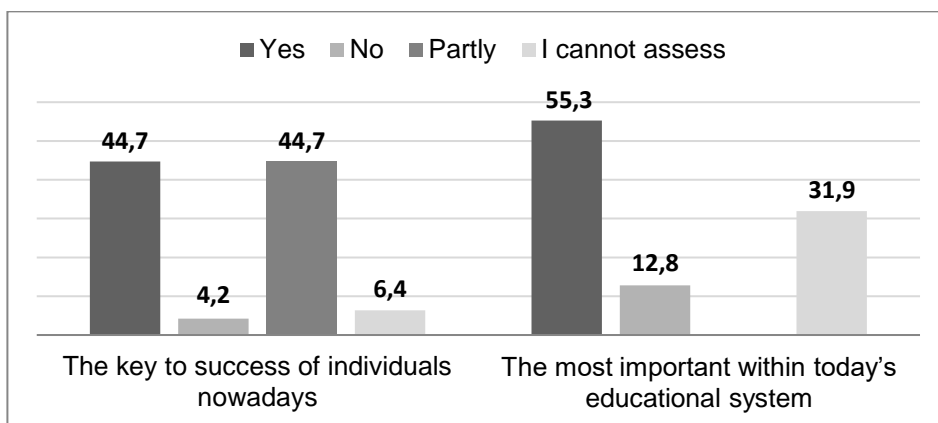


Figure 4. The importance of linguistic and communication subjects in today's society (%)

Table 2 shows the results of promoting intercultural competence among students. We can see arithmetic means and *SDs* for each of the indicators evaluated at the five-point Likert scale. Respondents considered all the offered indicators of intercultural competence to be important, with the exception of the last two that relate to the total liberation from all the features imposed by their own culture (ethnic, linguistic, classical and so on), as well as domination of the concepts of gender, sex and race. Probably, these indicators were estimated to be less important because of the respondents' fear of the individual and social consequences of the complete deregulation of the settings in terms of which we were socialised.

According to the results, teachers considered important all components of intercultural competence—cognitive (e.g., 'to explain values that are not part of the cultural and social context of students', 'to familiarise students with a variety of cultures and nations and their cultural, linguistic, social and other specificities', 'to break prejudices towards other nations and cultures' and so on), affective ('to overcome fear and rejection of the other and the different') and behavioural ('to develop tolerance towards other cultures and nations', 'to direct students towards the role of democratic citizens who respect differences ') (Table 2).

Table 2. The importance of promoting intercultural competence among students

	Mean	SD
To develop tolerance towards other cultures and nations	4.83	0.524
To approach and explain values that are not part of the cultural and social context of students	4.70	0.689
I To break prejudices against different cultures and individuals	4.79	0.587
M To familiarise students with a variety of cultures and nations and their cultural,	4.73	0.654
P linguistic, social and other specificities		
O To overcome the fear and rejection of the other and the different	4.70	0.587
R To encourage a critical reflection on racism and other discriminatory ideologies	4.81	0.495
T and movements		
A To raise students' awareness about the importance of multiculturalism and	4.62	0.968
N interculturalism for modern education and society		
T To direct students towards the role of democratic citizens who respect diversity (cultural and individual)	4.72	0.649
To address through teaching the concepts of race, nation, sex, gender and so on, where any of the entities can no longer be presented as a totality	3.98	1.343
To encourage students to set free from all kinds of determinations imposed by their 'innate cultures': Ethnic, gender, language, psycho-physical, social, classical and so on	3.94	1.374
To encourage students to overcome the concepts of race, sex, gender and so on	3.91	1.427

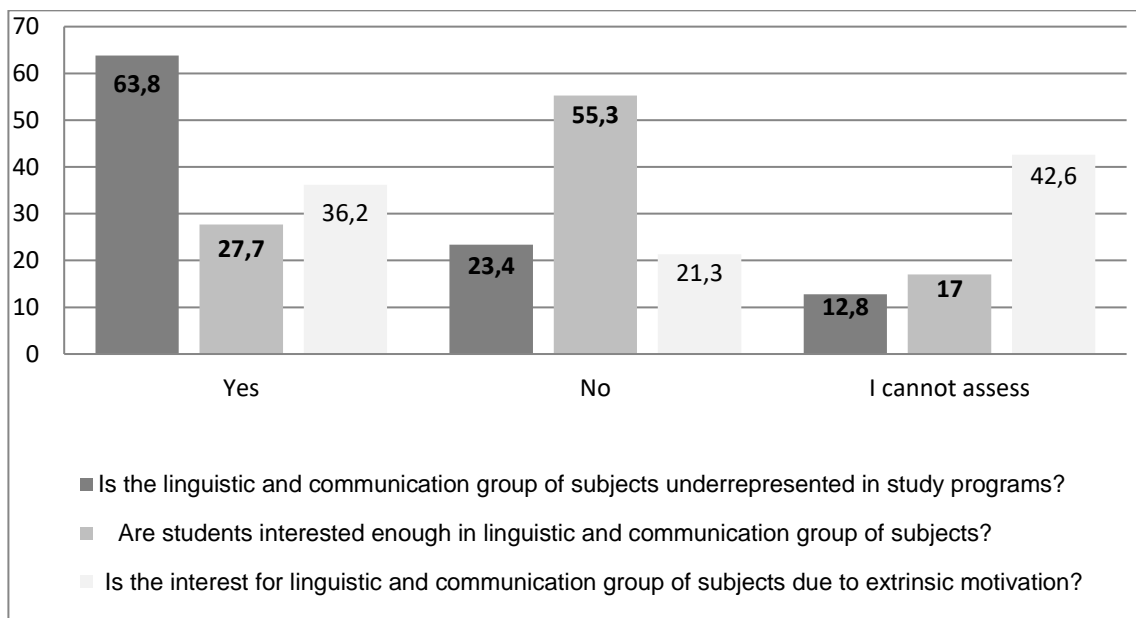
In any case, the responses suggest the need for the development of a deeper level of intercultural competence that goes beyond mere knowledge of the culture, traditions, customs and habits of certain language communities towards critical thinking about the target culture and cultural differences in general (Mikolic, 2011).

**Table 3. Engagement in development of intercultural competence among students**

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
I develop tolerance for other cultures and nations	4.66	0.060
I approach and explain values that are not part of the cultural and social context of students	4.49	0.906
E I break prejudices against different cultures and individuals	4.57	0.773
N I familiarise students with a variety of other cultures and nations and their cultural, G linguistic, social and other specificities	4.56	0.867
A I help overcome the fear and rejection of the other and the different	4.38	0.795
G I encourage critical reflection on racism and other discriminatory ideologies and E movements	4.51	0.777
M I make students aware of the importance of multiculturalism and interculturalism E for modern education and society	4.45	0.996
N I direct students towards the role of democratic citizens who respect diversity T (cultural and individual)	4.55	0.717
Through teaching, I address the concepts of race, nation, sex, gender and so on, where any of the entities can no longer be presented as a totality	3.68	0.337
I encourage students to set free from all kinds of determinations imposed by their 'innate cultures': Ethnic, gender, language, psycho-physical, social, classical and so on	3.74	1.359
I encourage students to overcome the concepts of race, sex, gender and so on	3.62	1.344

When discussing the position of language and communication group of subjects within higher education, most respondents pointed out that such subjects were under-represented (63.8%) (Figure 5). As many as one fifth of the respondents disagreed, while one tenth of them could not estimate; therefore, a survey on a larger number of respondents would offer a valuable insight into teachers' attitudes on that issue. Respondents were also divided in terms of the interest of students for language learning, with only one third of them considering that students were sufficiently interested in those subjects. Such attitudes are likely to arise from the status of language and communication group of subjects in higher education programs. In some study programs, language (of the profession) is mandatory, in some elective, and some do not even offer it; thus, it can be concluded that the situation varies to a great extent. In addition, respondents were divided regarding the motivation of students to learn a language—36.2% of them believed it was about extrinsic motivation (practical usage, work and so on), 21.3% said the opposite and even 42.6% could not assess. In further research, this issue needs to be specified—motivational factors can be multiple; therefore, it is necessary to ask respondents about the importance of extrinsic motivation in the motivational spectrum (so as not to seem to ask whether extrinsic motivation is the only form of student motivation) or to specify different types of motivation and to ask the respondents to assess their importance.





**Figure 5. The position of the linguistic and communication group of subjects in the educational system and the interest of the students for their attendance (%)**

The responses related to the student’s relationship towards language are not surprising in addition to the previous results. Most respondents (75.3%) believe that students think about language in a less and less critical way. The percentage of agreement is somewhat lower, albeit unfavourable, on the assumption that students generally lose their sense of care for language (67.8%). Such results probably reflect the attitudes of teachers on the student population in its widest sense, given the favourable self-assessment of the engagement of teachers in the development of intercultural competence among their students. In further studies, it would be necessary to specify the student population to which the indicator relates so as to obtain clearer responses (scientific discipline, study program and so on).

#### 4. Conclusion

The starting research assumptions were largely confirmed, though not to the extent that would jeopardise the viability of further research based on the pilot phase. Most respondents considered themselves competent and informed enough to discuss globalisation issues. Nevertheless, a significant part of the respondents could not assess this variable. The teachers believed it was important to promote intercultural competencies, and they positively assessed their own efforts to develop the competence among students. By contrast, the teachers found students losing their sense of care for language as they did not think deeper about it. The interest of students for such subjects showed problematic as well. It is likely that such linguistic superficiality refers to the student population as a whole, and not the students who are future language teachers (mostly respondents' students), which would be very worrying and therefore requires empirical scrutiny. Hence, the above does not mean that these results are not alarming. Potential linguistic superficiality signifies both superficiality towards one’s own culture, but also a diminished ability to understand the other, and the different in the global context we are all a part of. Consequently, this can also limit our perspectives within the social relationships we participate in.

## Acknowledgement

The authors thank Toni Popovic, teaching assistant at the University of Split, for his valuable advice in selecting literature and data processing.

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