# DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN AN ELECTRONIC ENVIRONMENT

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**Abstract**. *Over the last decade, the issue of the development of intercultural communicative competences (ICC) through modern digital tools has become topical. The aim of this paper is to point to the potential of digital technologies for the development of ICC. The paper offers an overview of research studies which confirm the efficiency of various digital tools in the development of intercultural interaction. The research results suggest the importance of Internet tools such as e-mail, digital stories, podcasts, television, and discussion forums in telecollaboration projects aimed at developing intercultural communication. In the conclusion we assert that the development of digital technologies and the emergence of new generation Internet tools provide exceptional opportunities for the development of an intercultural environment and communicative competence. In addition to numerous advantages, there are also possible problems which can arise in communication in an electronic environment, which can be avoided with dialogue and greater tolerance for different cultures.*

**Key words**: *ICC, digital tools, telecollaboration, intercultural exchange*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The process of globalisation, the increased mobility of the population, as well as the growing presence of migrants in Europe have significantly changed the familiar image of the continent, which, in line with the current changes, is progressively becoming a multilingual and multicultural environment. In the event of an encounter of different cultures, a special role is given to the development of intercultural communicative competences (ICC). They are founded upon profoundly humanistic values which promote a better understanding, transcend stereotypes and prejudices and build tolerance. The importance of these competences is

becoming increasingly prevalent as they constitute one of the key issues of education policies (Barrett et al., 2013: 2).

The need to develop ICC at all levels of education has been defined in *The Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning, Teaching and Assessment* (Council of Europe, 2001), which emphasises the importance of suitable preparation for the challenges which arise from increased mobility. The preparations comprise mutual understanding and tolerance, respect for one's identity and cultural differences, as well as the development of international communication.

In the process of developing ICC, the recommendation is to resort to innovative educational methods based on modern digital technologies. It is considered that the application of computer-mediated communication (CMC), i.e. the use of Internet technologies, can significantly contribute to intercultural exchange, which has been confirmed by numerous relevant research studies (cf. Lee and Markey, 2014; Chun, 2011). In that context, it is the aim of the present study to point to the importance of developing ICC by means of Internet technologies. The starting point for this review addresses the following questions: Do modern digital tools show potential for the development of ICC? Does the electronic environment offer advantages for ICC's development? Which tools are most often used in that environment and what problems may occur?

For the purpose of this paper, we present an overview of research into the application of ICC to accomplishing intercultural exchange and strengthening communicative competences in the process of foreign language acquisition.

## 2. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCES AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Intercultural communicative competences represent a sophisticated concept which encompasses certain knowledge, skills and competences in terms of communication in complex environments marked by a variety of nations, cultures and lifestyles. They entail students' general capacities for understanding the language and behaviour of the target community, as well as the possibility of adequate interpretation of the message intended for the members of one's own community. For the purpose of a better understanding of the essence of ICC, ICC-related issues need to be addressed: (a) definition – how to define ICC? (b) the relationship between ICC and foreign language acquisition – why is ICC connected with foreign language learning? (c) development opportunities – how to develop ICC?

According to Bilić-Štefan (2006: 227), in order to understand the concept of ICC more thoroughly, it is important to know the definition of two related phrases, i.e. 'intercultural communication' and 'intercultural competence'. Intercultural communication is communication between the members of different cultures which implies the awareness of differences and similarities, as well as the ability to mediate between different cultures (Byram, 1997). In a wider sense, it implies the use of different linguistic codes and contact between the members of different cultures who embrace different value systems. Intercultural competence implies particular knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for a successful exchange with the members of different cultures. The skills need to include linguistic, sociolinguistic and speech competences.

According to Alptekin (2002: 57), the ICC model implies knowledge of grammar, sociolinguistics, discourse and strategies for adequate navigation through different communicative situations. One of the basic definitions of the ICC concept was presented by

Alvino Fantini (Fantini, 2009: 458), who considers these competences to be the "complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself". The main components of intercultural communicative competence comprise characteristics such as openness, patience, empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, a sense of humour, self-esteem, flexibility and tolerance for difference, which are especially significant in the domain of establishing relations, good communication and co-operation. An important component is also the level of language competence for the purpose of developing positive skills and attitudes towards other cultures (Fantini, Garrett-Rucks, 2016). On the basis of these components, it is obvious that one deals with extremely significant competences which are crucial for efficient communication with members of other cultures, which is one of the most important objectives of foreign language learning.

The concept of ICC has excited great interest among the members of the scientific and professional community, which attests to its increasing popularity. Over the last decades this topic has been in the focus of numerous research studies, scientific conferences, projects, seminars, while in developed countries its scrutiny is a component part of educating professionals in different fields (Fantini, Garrett-Rucks, 2016; Bohinski, Leventhal, 2015; Godwin-Jones, 2013).

Experiences from all parts of the developed world indicate that ICC is studied as a major course in teacher training programmes which educate trainees in mass communication or management, as well as within international studies or studies of anthropology, social psychology, medical sciences. As ICC is the topic of research of various authors from various fields, foreign language experts write about it often as well (Paunović, 2013; Deardorff, 2010). The reason for the omnipresence of ICC as a topic lies in the fact that intercultural communication implies interaction among people who speak different languages.

The importance of ICC is emphasized within the domain of foreign languages because language is considered a tool of informing and transferring thoughts, knowledge, ideas, values, emotions, events. According to Đuričić and Georgijev (2013:66), there is a two-way relationship between language and culture. The use of language correlates with cultural patterns which dominate foreign cultures; therefore, apart from being acquainted with the basic principles of grammar and the lexicon, it is necessary to be acquainted with the extra-linguistic factors of a specific speech and cultural community.

It is believed that language and culture complement each other; it is important to study them equally because one needs to be acquainted with language as a system for the purpose of intercultural communication, as well as with cultural patterns which are characteristic of the target language and culture (Bodrič, 2006: 902). The knowledge of a foreign language is a precondition for ICC development so that one might efficiently become included in the process of interaction with the members of other cultures (Sablić, 2011). ICC development includes a cognitive, affective and behavioural domain (Lazarević, 2017: 164). A successful learning of a foreign language, i.e. of communication in a foreign language, requires knowledge of the culture of the language which one aspires to learn, as well as knowledge of one's own culture. Moreover, one should also be able to understand the differences and similarities between cultures. An important indicator of ICC is the ability to accept a different way of thinking, to respect and honour differences, to understand different perspectives on the same issue.

The possibilities for ICC development are closely related to learning foreign languages, especially in the domain of selecting cultural contents and methodological activities. In the

domain of cultural contents, according to Vujović (2004: 35), culture encompasses elements relating to the geographical characteristics of a country, historical events and persons, tradition and mores, scientific and technological achievements, economic and political aspects, daily habits and characteristics of the people whose language is learnt. However, cultural elements also comprise other patterns such as the manner of expression and communication (greeting, apologising, expressing gratitude, making requests and appeals, etc.). Janković, Tomović and Gledić (2017: 35) assert that this is the field of crucial importance for all those who find themselves in direct contact or correspondence with a person who uses the language one strives to learn.

The activities organised in classes are very important for the proper development of ICC and they mostly depend on teachers' didactic and methodological preparation. It is believed that teachers play a key role in motivating students, both by preparing and selecting suitable didactic materials. Namely, teachers can implement various activities which can influence the development of students' intercultural competences. Bilić-Štefan (2008) presents a diversified spectrum of activities which can be devised by teachers who resort to textbooks. By employing various workshops, debates and discussions, students can observe differences and similarities in cultural environments and become acquainted with verbal and non-verbal communication, mores and tradition. Through specially designed exercises students can analyse situations in which misunderstandings caused by cultural differences are frequently encountered. In that context, it is very important that students should develop adequate attitudes to establish successful communication with the members of other cultures and to understand their value systems better. Besides textbooks, the development of ICC is significantly influenced by the use of suitable audio-visual teaching tools by means of which one can present contents which contribute to the development of intercultural skills and attitudes, in a direct and interesting manner. It is well-known that various audio-visual tools which enable one to watch films and TV series or listen to music are used in the teaching process (Zobenica and Stipančević, 2016: 154).

A significant role is played by IT technologies, especially by modern digital tools, which are a part of the electronic learning environment. Internet tools create numerous opportunities for direct communication with people from other cultures. The intense development of technologies indubitably opens new perspectives on the development of ICC in the process of foreign language learning.

## 3. OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH STUDIES ON USING DIGITAL TOOLS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ICC

From the relevant literature, we can conclude that in the process of foreign language acquisition one can achieve better results if they resort to modern IT tools. Several authors have reached the conclusion that the use of digital tools offers greater success in acquiring knowledge and skills in key areas of any foreign language: grammar, vocabulary, speech, reading and writing, listening (Mohd Asraf, Supian, 2017; Wallace, 2016; Raftery, Santos, 2015; Golonka et al., 2014; Tushyeh, 2010; Stockwell, 2007).

The issue of efficient ICC development supported by modern digital tools has become more interesting to researchers. Significant information is offered in publications by Buckingham and Willett (2013) and Russo (2011), which deal with the role of digital media in presenting and exchanging cultural content. Although the importance of digital tools has

been recognised in the framework of foreign language learning, numerous questions remain open as to the efficient manner of integration and use of suitable media tools for the purpose of obtaining better results in the domain of interculturalism. In search of adequate solutions, experts' attention has been devoted to web 2.0 digital tools which pave the way for new technology-based learning models, with the aim of supporting teachers and students who wish to understand language through culture and culture through language.

The use of digital technologies in the process of acquiring the cultural content of foreign languages has been more thoroughly studied after the 1970s, when the communication method was developed and when deeper understanding of the foreign culture real context became significant. Using digital technologies in acquiring cultural content necessitates the development of ICC through an effective interaction with individuals from different cultures. In that context, the importance of electronic learning environments is emphasized, especially the importance of various digital tools which, owing to their technical characteristics, enable one to approach modern cultural artefacts and the authentic use of language which one aims to master (Baker, 2012; Furstenberg, 2010).

In the framework of digital technologies, a special place is occupied by the Internet as a global network with high potentials for realising intercultural interaction. During the last twenty years, a significant role in the online method for foreign language learning has been played by telecollaboration. According to Belz (2002: 61), telecollaboration can be defined "...as the application of global communication networks in foreign language education". The terms 'online intercultural exchange' (OIE) and the Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language learning (ICFLE) are used to designate this type of distance learning. By resorting to telecollaboration, it is possible to include students in dialogues with their peers from the most distant parts of the world. The first Internet tools used for the purpose of telecollaboration were e-mail and various discussion forums. They were followed by increasingly popular virtual learning environments, web 2.0, wikis and blogs. In recent years, the list of popular tools includes telecollaboration projects which, apart from using online speech, offer the possibility of organising preliminary discussions, various surveys dealing with one's own or target culture, discussions about shared texts or video clips.

Our aim is to present relevant research papers dealing with the development of ICC through digital tools. For the purposes of this review, the Google Scholar search engine (https://scholar.google.com/) was used to search for the following key words: ICC, digital tools and telecollaboration. The main focus of the search was on papers published after 2000, due to the emergence of large number of digital tools that provide opportunities for the development of ICC in this period. Most of the selected papers were in English, while the selection also included a small number of papers in Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian.

In the process of researching the role of telecollaboration in the practice of foreign language learning at European universities, significant information is offered in a study by Francesca Helm (2015), which involves teachers and students from twenty-three European countries. The study examined the experience of learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) from Palestine and Italy, who participated in a large telecollaboration project, the Soliya Connect Program (SCP). In this program, students participated in nine weeks of two-hour synchronous audio-video group discussions in English led by trained facilitators (Helm, 2015: 103–104). The results of this study reveal mostly positive attitudes towards telecollaboration, as well as various issues which relate to its application. According to the obtained results in the domain of ICC development through Internet communication and in line with the respondents' estimates, significant advancement has been achieved with

respect to linguistic and other components (Helm, 2015: 207). In the conclusion of the paper, the author recommends resorting to a dialogue for a better intercultural exchange and the resolution of potentially sensitive issues.

A large number of studies (cf. Guth and Helm, 2010; O'Dowd, 2007) point to learning benefits through telecollaboration, such as the advancement in language learning and increased knowledge of culture and its specificities. In telecollaborative learning, the importance of different digital tools from the standpoint of interculturalism is greatly emphasized. These tools include e-mail exchange, learning in pairs, discussion forums, chat sessions and other types of text messages (Godwin-Jones, 2013).

In a case study dealing with the co-operation between German and American university students, Belz (2003) demonstrates the impact telecollaboration can have on the development of intercultural (linguistic and intercultural) competences. In the first phase, the students from the USA prepared a web page which comprises individual biographies. At the beginning of the second phase, the German students, on the basis of the biographies presented, chose partners with whom they shall communicate via e-mail. After making their acquaintances, the students had a task related to texts on phenomena from different socio-cultural perspectives (e.g. racism, beauty) in order to develop intercultural competences. During the project, all members of one group had the opportunity to read every e-mail sent to their folder, which enabled a more complete insight into the contents of the messages received. The results of the study indicate positive effects of the use of e-mails in the domain of ICC.

Similarly, positive effects of the use of e-mail have also been indicated in a study by O'Dowd (2003), which was realised with the help of five pairs of Spanish and English sophomore students. O'Dowd's study employs qualitative methods. Namely, the author resorts to content analysis, as well as questionnaires and interviews with students who participated in the study. The research results indicate that important factors which condition successful intercultural learning in virtual exchanges are the following: the ability to establish personal contact with partners via e-mail, sensitivity to one's partner's needs, communication style and the capability of elaborate correspondence. Through exchange and dialogue with their partners, the students managed to develop a better understanding of different cultural patterns and practices, which contributed to the development of their intercultural competences. The results of the study also indicate that stereotypes and negative attitudes may grow stronger if communication and exchange fail to be functional (O'Dowd, 2003).

Although there are new generation Internet tools, the use of e-mail is still very frequent in ICC research studies. In support of this assertion, the research into telecollaborative exchange has indicated that e-mail provides researchers with precious insight into the study of ICC. Bohinski and Leventhal (2015) state that by establishing partnerships between students from different cultures via e-sources, the participants' experience changes, their internal motivation develops further along with deeper personal connections, which produces better results in intercultural learning. Also, an earlier study by Hertel (2003), which was realised with students from colleges in the USA and Mexico, ascertained that students reacted positively to an exchange via e-mail as well as that they felt that such an experience influenced their attitudes and perceptions of the Mexican culture.

Blogs, as an Internet tool, can provide support for ICC development, which has been confirmed by Elola and Oskoz (2008), in a study conducted with students from Spain and the USA. The students used blogs as a means of mediation and in the course of a semester,

they described their attitudes about the selected cultural topics. During the research, the students from abroad pointed to changes in their attitudes in terms of confirming or discarding various prejudice against Spanish culture, especially when their classroom knowledge failed to coincide with information obtained first-hand, through the blog. In order to further scrutinise the results obtained, besides analysing the blog contents, the research also resorted to two questionnaires intended for the respondents. After data processing, it was ascertained that the use of blogs in communication exchange has a positive impact on students' intercultural competence. Thus, it was confirmed that blogs, as a dynamic communication space, were suitable for the development of target culture interactions, as well as that they offered learning opportunities and encouraged thinking. It can be claimed that blogs enable students to better understand intercultural information and perspectives (Elola and Oskoz, 2008).

In recent years, the focus of research has been directed towards the potentials of collaborative intercultural learning with the help of digital tools. Collaborative digital storytelling offers a series of benefits in the ICC development, and evades several limitations which exist when working in a classroom. Through collaborative storytelling, the emotional aspect of a person is engaged, which makes this strategy more efficient at improving intercultural understanding. Digital stories help students understand emotions better, develop empathy towards the members of other cultures, analyse and solve misunderstandings from different perspectives.

Castañeda's (2013) study titled examined students' experiences regarding the use of digital storytelling in their high school fourth-year Spanish class. The aim of this case study was to determine whether digital storytelling can be an effective tool for language learners when communicating emotions and presenting information. The research results indicated that a combination of video clips and stories can be especially interesting, which adds a new dimension and quality to the process of learning and constitutes greater motivation for students (Castañeda, 2013).

Multimodal digital stories describing everyday life and local cultures offer support for language learning and the development of intercultural understanding. This was tested and confirmed in the work of Oakley et al. (2017), which was realised in 2013 and 2014 with Australian and Chinese secondary school pupils. The aim of this project was to help teachers and students mutually become acquainted with wealth, variety and dynamics of different cultures. In the domain of developing intercultural competences, the research offers data on similarities and differences discovered in digital stories. The Chinese students stated that they had learned more about themselves and their culture and that they had acquired a better understanding of the tradition, values and way of life of previous generations. On the other hand, the Australian teachers indicated the presence of differences and they stated that most Chinese students had not had an opportunity to travel abroad. They learned about Australian culture through textbooks, films and Internet materials, which certainly caused some difficulties. Regardless of the differences, the results indicate that exchanging digital stories brings benefits to ICC development.

For the purpose of achieving better effects in developing ICC, Lee (2009) presented the integration of podcasts and blogs in a telecollaborative project with Spanish and American students. The results show that the combined use of blogs and podcasts contributes to intercultural exchange of students in a socio-cultural perspective. Similarly, a combination of Twitter, blogs and podcasts offers good results in the domain of developing interculturalism (Lee and Markey, 2014). Essentially, an integration of web 2.0 tools offers

students the possibility to acquire knowledge of culture by combining various sources, discuss different topics, cultural principles and practices.

Resorting to telecollaboration for the purposes of intercultural communication in the context of foreign languages has become an increasingly popular topic in research papers (cf. Ryshina-Pankova, 2018; Çiftçi and Savaş, 2017). Support for telecollaboration came from a study presenting results collected from various schools in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain, in which Kohn and Hoffstaedter (2017) used video communication platforms (BigBlueButton and Moodle chat). The aim of this research was to examine how an exchange through collaboration influenced the authentic practice of intercultural communication and the development of competences for foreign language learning outside the high school classroom. The data analysis showed that students had a greater need for participating in communication and that there was a tendency to develop the designated topics, as well as a greater success in communication. Furthermore, non-native speakers felt greater pleasure, self-confidence and faith in their own creativity and strategic resourcefulness. The key research results were related to the improvement of ICC development, as well as to the benefits obtained by including real life elements into the foreign language learning process (Kohn and Hoffstaedter, 2017).

The application of telecollaborative activities has a significant impact in the development of intercultural communication, although we need to bear in mind the possible problems which can occur in its realisation. Some difficulties and contradictions, especially those relating to group functioning, are emphasised by Priego and Liaw (2017), a research study organised by French language teachers with students in Canada and Taiwan. In an endeavour based on writing and analysing multilingual stories, certain tensions and contradictions are observed among the members of intercultural co-operation groups. In search of solutions, the researchers analysed participants' correspondence, including discussions and Facebook posts, in order to identify misunderstandings and conflicts. The study indicates that the main sources of misunderstandings are related to digital tools, rules, group functioning and division of work activities (Priego and Liaw, 2017).

The problems which may occur during online interaction are different and they can relate to all project participants, students, teachers and the associated staff. The key issues can be related to different views, and even words which are used in the same manner can have different semantic connotations. The possibility of an occurrence of this kind of problem is indicated in the study Orsini-Jones et al. (2017). This study specifically presents misunderstandings which occurred in relation to the "lack of online interactional competences, in their inability to distinguish online genres in intercultural communication and in their lack of netiquette awareness both in their native language and/or in the target language studied (if/when applicable)" (Orsini-Jones et al., 2017: 219).

The source of the problems which may occur during online interaction can stem from the differences in demographic factors related to the specificities of the environments from which the participants come, or to their identities, ethos, etc. Furthermore, problems in intercultural exchanges can also be conditioned by subjective factors, such as different expectations from the project in which one participates, etc. Misunderstandings in online communication in the domain of intercultural competences can raise problematic questions or provoke incidents. In such situations, it is recommended to resort to a dialogue in order to solve issues and conflicts, as indicated in Helm, Guth and Farrah (2012). It is believed that problematic situations should not raise concern, but should instead serve as a good motivation for researchers. Such situations can be a good basis for new research projects or

development of new telecollaborative projects aiming at an efficient exchange with other cultures by means of the digital media (Amant, 2002).


## 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the past twenty years the relationship between digital technologies and ICC has become an increasingly interesting field of research for various authors. What is particularly striking is the growth in the number of research papers in the field of foreign language learning. Their standpoints are different, but they all seem to be related to various issues that arise when intercultural exchange and modern digital technologies are linked to one another. The reasons for such an interest can be traced to considerable potentials of digital tools of the new generation which enable communication among participants from different geographical areas in real time. In that context, a significant role is played by telecollaboration which provides opportunities for active communication, exchange and a better understanding of intercultural information and perspectives.

On the basis of the overview on the research papers presented above, we can conclude that digital tools have a considerable potential in the development of ICC. In recent literature, there are numerous papers which deal with the development of ICC, especially during the last decade when they have become a significant issue in educational policies.

The application of digital tools in the development of ICC had a certain dynamic which was primarily conditioned by the development of Internet technologies. During the nineties people mostly resorted to simple Internet tools such as e-mail and discussion forums for the purpose of telecollaborative learning. The development of the Internet led to the advent of new digital tools, which were simultaneously used in telecollaborative projects in order to develop interculturalism and communication skills.

Most papers stress the fact that electronic environments offer advantages for the development of ICC. Namely, it has been confirmed that, when using e-mail, students develop greater sensitivity to the members of other cultures, as well as adequate styles of communication, inner motivation for learning and deeper personal liaisons (Belz, 2003; Bohinski and Leventhal, 2015). Various authors point to a high value of written digital texts such as blogs and digital stories which help students develop not merely a cognitive, but also emotional dimension, comprising empathy and tolerance which provides support for a better understanding of a cultural encounter (Elola and Oskoz, 2008; Castañeda, 2013). Some of the research results indicate that the integration of various digital tools in telecollaborative projects, twitter, blogs and podcast, etc. contributes to the intercultural exchange of students and strengthens competences (Lee, 2009; Lee and Markey, 2014).

Although the use of telecollaboration bears manifold significance as related to the development of ICC, various issues, difficulties and contradictions can occur in the process of its realisation (Priego, Liaw, 2017). The problems in online interaction can be related to all project participants, and they relate to differences in understanding the meaning and interpretation of certain words and expressions (Orsini-Jones et al., 2017). Besides problems of a purely linguistic nature, one can encounter misunderstandings conditioned by demographic factors, identity, life context, lack of technical literacy, problems of a technical kind, etc. Such misunderstandings can produce various issues and provoke incidents caused by cultural differences. Accordingly, it is recommended that one tread carefully in realising collaborative activities, so as to avoid undesirable effects.

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# RAZVOJ INTERKULTURALNIH KOMUNIKATIVNIH KOMPETENCIJA U ELEKTRONSKOM OKRUŽENJU

*Tokom poslednje decenije postavlja se pitanje razvoja interkulturalnih komunikativnih kompetencija uz primenu savremenih digitalnih alata. Cilj ovog rada je da se na osnovu uvida u istraživačke studije ukaže na mogućnosti digitalnih tehnologija u razvoju interkulturalnih komunikativnih kompetencija. U skladu sa tim, u radu se daje pregled istraživanja u kojima je potvrđena efikasnost različitih digitalnih alata u razvoju međukulturne interakcije. Rezultati istraživanja ukazuju na značaj internet alata poput elektronske pošte, digitalnih priča, podkasta, tvitera, formuma, u projektima telekolaboracije koja je namenjena razvoju interkulturne komunikacije.*

*U zaključnom delu rada se konstatuje da razvoj digitalnih tehnologija i pojava internet alata novije generacije pruža izuzetne mogućnosti za razvoj interkulturalnosti, međukulturne razmene i kompetencija vezanih za komunikaciju. Međutim, osim brojnih prednosti ukazujemo i na nesporazume i moguće probleme koji se mogu javiti u komunikaciji u elektronskom okruženju, koji se mogu izbeći uz dijalog i veću toleranciju za različite kulture.*

Ključne reči:   *interkulturalne komunikativne kompetencije, digitalni alati, telekolaboracija, međukulturna razmena*