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Original research article

BRIDGING LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL OBSTACLES IN TEACHING SKIING

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Abstract. *Teaching skiing, due to its international dimension, needs some adaptations or modifications to fit a particular culture setting. The main purpose of this pilot study was to verify the existence and identify the main obstacles ski instructors are faced with and to analyse strategies they use in teaching skiing. An on-line survey questionnaire was sent to Slovene ski instructors and to an international team of ski instructors in Japan ski resorts. The survey consisted of 25 questions about socio-demographic characteristics, experiences in teaching skiing and strategies related to the language and cultural differences of ski instructors. The response rate was expectedly low (20%), because the duration of the survey was only eight days. However, a group of 80 ski instructors (age 30.5±8.8 years; 50% female) were included in the research. The analyzed data confirmed the existence of obstacles and difficulties in communication and also some unpleasant culture related situations with foreign students. Most difficulties in teaching lessons were caused by poor or insufficient understanding of instruction and improper understanding of general questions of the student status and wellbeing. Further attention to evidenced intolerance among different students in the group with multicultural environment is needed. Concerning the gained competences in ski instructor training, further action should be focused towards increased proficiency in foreign language and social skills. Results from the pilot study offer an important baseline for further research to expand sociocultural consciousness and adapt curricula for contemporary ski instructors' competences and increase effectiveness in teaching foreign student skiing.*

Key words: *winter sports, language and culture differences, teaching competences, sociocultural consciousness.*

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INTRODUCTION

Alpine skiing is no doubt one of the most popular winter sports in the world. If we count the beginning of skiing tradition as a utilitarian means of locomotion in the northern European and subarctic region, in the 20th century skiing became not just a pleasant leisure activity or challenging form of physical exercise, but also a reflection of modernity (Zeimilski in Denning, 2014). The popularity of the skiing revolution also began because of the invention of winter holidays which made mountain resorts economically stable by enabling year-round economic activity. Not just economy, skiing created a new form of sociability, less formal and more democratic behaviour of skiers, breaking down the social hierarchies typical of modern metropolises. Especially active participatory ethos differentiated skiing from other popular pastimes (Denning, 2014). As a social (modern and postmodern) phenomenon, Alpine skiing became popular all over the world and was spread to all the continents (Tumbat, 2017; Fry, 2017). Although the skiing tradition in Japan, Australia, South America and even China and Arabic countries is young, the popularity of skiing is growing. Globalisation and modernisation help Alpine skiing get closer to the users (with artificial snow and slopes) or enable users to reach new destinations (ski resorts) according to the developed skiing facilities (Gross & Winiwarter, 2015; Nurmi, 2014). Thus, it is not unusual that you can find people from Asia or Arabia skiing in Europe, Europeans in Japan etc., as it is not unusual for professional ski instructors to follow winter seasons and after working in the USA, Europe or Japan they prolong winter season in Australia, New Zealand or Chile. Putting Alpine skiing as a popular sport on the world map also means opening it up to multiculturalism. Being aware that styles and patterns of sport involvement vary across cultures, adaptations or modifications of associated rules, rituals and ceremonies to fit a particular culture setting are sometimes required (Thomas & Dyal, 1999). When teaching skiing, it could be possible to clash to different obstacles in communication referring to the language and cultural differences of a student.

Besides the development of tourism services, ski areas and the ski equipment industry (Hudson & Hudson, 2015; Buckley, 2010), Alpine skiing has also developed methodical and pedagogical strategies of teaching skiing (Garner & Hill, 2017). Multiculturalism on the ski slopes provoke us to research this phenomenon, so the main purpose of this pilot study was to verify existence of the obstacles, to identify the main obstacles ski teachers are faced with and to find out what kind of strategies they use to overcome them. Along the present status, the results of the pilot study will additionally serve to identify the lack of competences of ski instructors for teaching foreign students coming from a multicultural environment.

METHODS

An on-line survey questionnaire "Language and cultural obstacles in teaching skiing" (Pišot & Pišot, 2017) was made in the frame of national academic Ika (EnKlikAnketa) portal on-line surveys (<https://www.ika.si/>) and was sent to Slovene ski instructors (Slovene version) and to an international ski instructor team in Japan (English version). The survey consisted of 25 questions about socio-demographic characteristics, experiences of teaching skiing, experiences and strategies related to language and cultural experiences of ski instructors and estimation of competence sufficiency.

The main research questions were: i) Are there any cultural and language differences experienced in teaching skiing; ii) What are the most common obstacles in communication

with foreign students; iii) How are ski instructors satisfied with gained competences to teach foreign students; iv) Which competences do they lack? v) What kind of teaching strategies do they use to overcome obstacles when they appear?

Invitations to participate in the survey were sent via social networks (Facebook groups of ski instructors, ski schools), via e-mail addresses of some ski clubs and also the “snow ball” method was used. Because of time limitation only 8 days of open access of the survey were provided. Due to the short period of data collection the respond rate was expectedly low, estimated around 20%. Only questionnaires fulfilled completely were taken for further analysis. From over 200 respondents who clicked on the questionnaire, 80 ski instructors (age 30.4 ± 8.8 years; 50% female) completed the on-line survey. The group consisted of 68 Slovene Ski Instructors (questionnaires in the Slovene language) and 12 questionnaires from foreign Ski Instructors in the English language. Lots of questionnaires were half fulfilled, participants dropped out especially in the part of intercultural diversity and accepting cultural and linguistic differences, where a respondent needs to be more précised and retrospective.

Statistical analyses

Data from the questionnaires were analyzed in the framework of Ika platform where the on-line survey was created, with its statistical tool and presented at the level of descriptive statistics in the Windows Office Excel software.

RESULTS

According to the main research question the focus was mostly on the results concerned with the existence of language and cultural obstacles, competences and strategies of ski instructors not differentiating between the gender or nationality of the respondents. Also Slovene group of ski instructors were not differentiated ($n=68$; age 31 ± 8.4 years; 51% female) from foreign ski instructors ($n=12$, age 27.5 ± 5.33 years, 58% female), because there were no differences in the analyzed characteristics (non-parametric T-test at the level $p < 0.05$). Consequently, in further analyses all 80 fulfilled questionnaires were taken into consideration.

The profile characteristics of the ski instructors in the sample were as follows: i) the sample was homogenous in terms of gender ($n=80$; 40 males, age 30.5 ± 8.8 years), ii) the undergraduate level of education of the ski instructors and higher prevailed (58.5%). iii) an interesting point is that the youngest ski instructor was 18 years and the oldest was 60 years of age. Most ski instructors were in the age group from 21 to 25 years (35%) and from 26 to 30 years (25%), 15% of them were older than 40 (Figure 1).

Most of the ski instructors had higher proficiency levels (level 2; 46.3 %) or level 3 (40%), with certifications ISIA,

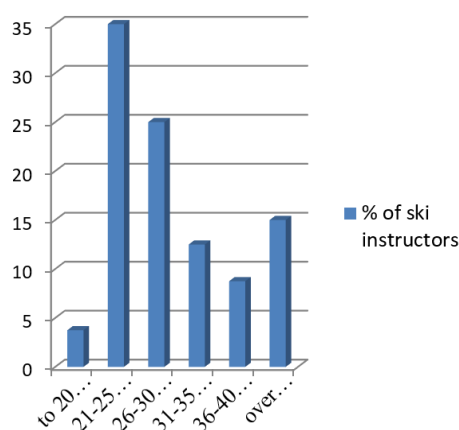


Fig. 1 Structure of ski instructors related to age

IVSS, MOU..., just 12% of them exceed level 1. According to the high level of proficiency the days of skiing teaching (working snow days - WSD) were consistently high, and the average sum was 72.15 WSD per year. They executed on average 50.6 WSD for local ski schools (ski schools in their homeland) (n=66), and among them 52 ski instructors executed an average of 34.2 WSD also for foreign ski schools. More detailed (Figure 2), it is summarized that most of the ski instructors executed up to 30 WSD; 54.5% for local ski schools and 68.7 % for foreign ski schools, a further 36,4% of ski instructors were engaged for the entire winter season (from 30-90 days) in local ski schools and 17.9% in foreign ski school. Because winter in Europe lasts for three months, there were just 9% of ski instructors who executed from 90-120 WSD (local and foreign ski schools), no ski instructors who executed more than 120 for local ski schools and just a few of them (4.5 %; n=3) prolonged the ski teaching season on different continents from 4 to 6 months per year.

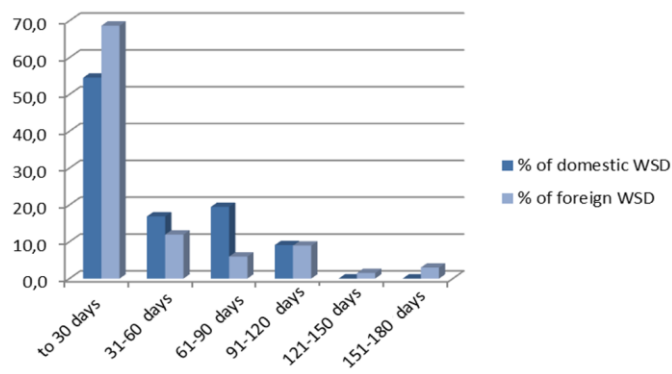


Fig. 2 Working snow days (WSD) per year for local and foreign ski schools

The arrangements of ski instructors from the sample consequently also shows years of teaching experience (Figure 3): only 12.5 % are beginners (level 1) more than half of the ski instructors have 4-10 years (53.8%), 16.3% 11-15 years, 8.8 % 16-20 years and 9% of them exceed 20 years of experiences. In the sample it is analyzed semi to highly experienced ski instructors with a local and foreign dimension so the data referring to teaching experiences can be assumed as valuable.

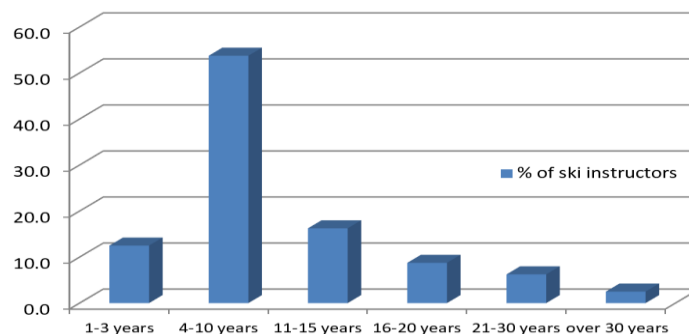


Fig. 3. Structure of years of experiences of ski instructors

Regarding the existence of language (misunderstandings) and cultural barriers (negative aspects of intercultural relations such as prejudice, stereotyping) or obstacles at their work, ski instructors were asked if they had experienced some behavioral particularities of students related to different cultures and languages. Almost half of them have (45.6 %) experienced language or cultural differences. Most often the obstacles were improper understanding of the instruction (47.9%) and improper understanding of the general question of the student status and wellbeing (19.7%). 12.7% of the ski instructors evidenced even intolerance among different students in the group. In the remaining answers most of them referred to: “mistrust of foreign ski instructors”, “longer time needed for instructions in two or more languages”.

Unpleasant experiences of ski instructors mostly referred to some language mistakes, misunderstandings and difficulties in conversation, but there were also some unpleasant experiences stemming from differences in the cultural environment of the students. There are some statements chosen from answers ski instructors (SI) gave us and referred to cultural behaviors, patterns and rules:

“Difficulties are in principle connected with matters regarding using the toilet. As a male teacher I had problems when I took a girl to the toilet. (Male ski instructor 31 years, level 3)

“Two students were starting to fight because of national intolerance. Because we were not able to calm them down, we called their parents. But when the parents realized the reason for the fight, they started to fight, too.” (Female SI, 22 years, level 3)

“I was teaching a family from Hong Kong and there were 4 instructors teaching different levels of one group, the adults in the family thought that the male instructor was superior to the females. It was awkward for all the instructors throughout the week. (Female SI, 26 years, level 3)

“Disregard of rules and instructions of adults from England”. (Female SI 24 years, level 2)

“The Dutch need to learn some manners and need a boot up the bum” (Female SI, 25 years, level 3).

The main unpleasant experiences resulted from language barriers, caused by not knowing the language of communication on the part of the ski instructor or student. They occurred especially when the communication language was a foreign language for both of them, the student and the instructors. That showed that a “connection between language and culture that diverts the speaker to search for more general, usable patterns in the interaction with speakers of other language and culture” (Agar, 1994) was not well established.

“When a customer (adult) found out that the language of communication was not my mother tongue, he demanded a new ski instructor.” (Female SI, 24 years, level 3)

“Teaching an adult Turkish female, who didn’t understand English wasn’t so embarrassing than fun. There was hardly any conversation and was quite embarrassing when she invited me for a drink with no words”. (Male SI, 27 years, level 3)

“Because of the language barrier for a girl student it was hard to understand the instructions”. (Female SI, 23 years, level 3)

“We couldn’t find out what kind of language the boy spoke. At the end of the lesson we realized that he is Scottish.” (Male SI, 29 years, level 3)

“I asked a girl of 5 years from Croatia if she is “trudna” what in Slovene means “being tired”, but in Croatian means “being pregnant”. I realized my mistake a few seconds later.” (Female SI, 27 years, level 2).

“Embarrassing time – difficult conversations with adults on the chair lift.” (Male SI, 26 years, level 2)

“Disinterestedness of students because of lack of my linguistic knowledge”. (Female SI, 31 years, level 3)

“I have difficulties to motivate younger students because of language barriers”. (Male SI, 29 years, level 2)

“The students couldn’t speak English. It was very difficult to execute a superior lesson.” (Male SI, 21 years, level 1)

“Teaching a Russian student where I speak no Russian and also teaching an adaptive student who was non-verbal. Both required gestures and hands-on assistance.” (Male, 31 years, level 3)

Additionally ski instructors were asked how they estimated their competence for teaching skiing foreign students and students from a multicultural environment. One third of them were quite (20.3%) or very (12.7%) satisfied with their achieved competences of teaching skiing to foreign students in the frame of ski instructors’ certification training. Attention needs to be paid to almost half of the ski instructors who are not satisfied (27.8%) and not satisfied at all (16.5%) with the achieved competences. At the same time ski instructors have identified the need to get; i) more proficiency in foreign language (71.4 %), more knowledge about the culture (24.7 %) and more social skills (21.1 %). To overcome the language and cultural obstacles and unpleasant situations ski instructors mostly search for help from their ski-colleagues (56 %) while (38.5%) use available sources (on-line translators, internet sources, professional literature). Just three of them (4.6%) searched for help from their superiors at ski schools.

DISCUSSION

Results from the pilot study offer an important baseline for further research. It is confirmed that almost half of the respondents have experienced at least one situation which they understood to include difficulties caused by the cultural and language differences of a student. From that point of view it can be noticed that even more experienced ski instructors occasionally came across an unusual or unpleasant situation where additional knowledge is needed to solve it. This can be explained by the statement that mutual knowledge of one another is needed for the basis, because “various ethnic communities speaking different languages can comprehend and accept cultural norms of other groups and establish unbiased interaction” (Čok, 2015).

According to Čok (2015), the importance of creating a trans-cultural and multicultural individual (referring to our context: ski instructor) for the future postmodern society is more than obvious because of concurrent trends of globalization, mass migration, intensified intercultural contacts at individual and informal levels where teaching skiing is no exception. In such social circumstances, the emergence of an individual who has experience and knowledge of multiculturalism, intercultural awareness and sensibility is necessary to avoid the negative aspects of intercultural relations. To produce a plurilingual communicator, the intelligent listener and the intercultural mediator (Čok, 2015), new approaches in teaching and learning languages already designed have to be incorporated into ski schools and ski instructor education programmes.

Proficiency in foreign language was stated as the most needed knowledge or skills for more than 70% of ski instructors. The results also showed that for more than 65% of the ski instructors English is the first foreign language for communication with foreign students. Consequently the problem occurs when students come from countries where

English is not one of the foreign language in the education system. That is evident from the answers in the questionnaires and more attention needs to be paid to the new flow of ski students (beginners) from the East (Russian, Turkey, Middle East, China or Japan). Special challenges in the near future will also be found in creating new strategies for teaching foreign children to overcome communication barriers when knowledge of foreign language is inadequate to follow the lesson easily and efficiently.

Being aware that barriers exist and that most of them are caused by a lack of linguistic competences and that difficulties are generated also from different cultural environment, our next challenge will be wider international research with more participants and more nationalities with the aim of expanding sociocultural consciousness (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), and acquisition of competences needed when teaching foreign students skiing. Sociocultural consciousness means an understanding that people's ways of thinking, behaving and being are deeply influenced by such factor as race, ethnicity, social class and language (Banks, 1995)

In the next step – in the frame of six silent characteristics (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) the goal that will have been followed is to adapt and overbuild the curriculum to educate the culturally responsive teacher who has: a) sociocultural consciousness: the ski instructors is able to recognize multiple ways of perceiving reality and that these ways are influenced by his/her social location; b) has an affirming attitude towards students from culturally diverse backgrounds; c) has commitment and skills to act as an agent of change; d) has constructivist views of learning; e) is acquainted with his/her students and f) has culturally responsive teaching practises (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

CONCLUSION

Although a drawback of the project could be the small sample of completed questionnaires (n=80), the results pointed to the existence of barriers and difficulties in teaching skiing in a multicultural environment. We should adapt the questionnaire and make some technical corrections and validate it to enable execution in wider international research. Also we need to expand the question who bears the responsibility of educating competent ski instructors (on the field of language and social skills). Is that the institutional responsibility (the national ski association) of ski instructor training course providers, the responsibility of ski schools as providers of services or just of the ski instructor himself/herself to create for himself/herself more competitive position? The answer to the question will be found in the frame of our future work. And finally focus should also be oriented on the revision of the available ski instructor's course system to adapt the content with the new trends with new knowledge about particularities in different cultural environments and social skills. With that in mind we could shorten the gap of almost three quarters of ski instructors who were not satisfied with the competences achieved in the frame of ski instructor's courses.

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KAKO PREVAZIĆI JEZIČKE I KULTURNE PREPREKE U NASTAVI SKIJANJA

Učenje skijanja, popularnog zimskog sporta, zbog svog međunarodnog karaktera, zahteva neka prilagođavanja ili modifikacije koje odgovaraju određenom kulturnom okruženju. Glavni cilj ovog pilot istraživanja bio je da se proveriti postojanje i identifikuju glavne prepreke sa kojima se suočavaju ski instruktori i analiziraju strategije koje se koriste u učenju skijanja. Upitnik je distribuiran slovenskim instruktorima za skijanje i međunarodnom timu instruktora za skijanje u japanskim skijalištima. Činilo ga je 25 pitanja o demografskim karakteristikama, iskustvima u nastavi skijanja i strategijama vezanim za jezik i kulturne razlike instruktora. Stopa odgovora je bila očekivano niska (20%), jer je trajanje ankete bilo samo osam dana. Međutim, u istraživanje je uključena još i grupa od 80 instruktora za skijanje (starost 30.5±8.8 godina, 50% žena). Analizirani podaci potvrdili su postojanje prepreka i poteškoća u komunikaciji, kao i neke neprijatne situacije vezane za nepoznavanje drugih kultura koje su se odigravale sa stranim studentima. Najveći broj poteškoća u nastavi prouzrokovalo je loše ili nedovoljno razumevanje nastave i pogrešno tumačenje opštih pitanja o statusu i stanju učenika. Potrebno je posvetiti više pažnje dokazanom postojanju netolerancije među različitim studentima u multikulturalnom okruženju. Što se tiče stečenih kompetencija u obuci instruktora za skijanje, dalje aktivnosti bi trebalo da budu fokusirane na uvećanje poznavanja stranih jezika i socijalnih veština. Rezultati pilot istraživanja pružaju važnu osnovu za dalji rad kako bi se proširila sociokulturna svest i adaptirali nastavni planovi za savremene kompetencije instruktora skijanja i povećala efikasnost u učenju stranih studenata da skijaju.

Ključne reči: zimski sport, jezičke i kulturne razlike, kompetencije nastavnika, socio-kulturna svest.