EXTRACURRICULAR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE PROMOTION EVENTS AS INFORMAL LANGUAGE LEARNING SETTINGS

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Abstract

The aim of the research is to investigate how extracurricular language and culture promotion events organised at a higher education institution and involving numbers of students in organisation, participation and dissemination of such events can serve as settings for informal foreign language learning. The conceptual framework of the study is grounded in informal learning theories (Knowles, 1970; Cross, 2007) which relate informal learning to implicit learning, experiential learning, and acquisition of tacit knowledge. In this study informal language learning is used in terms of creating and acquiring foreign language knowledge, skills and attitudes while interacting, cooperating and collaborating with social event participants in various language and culture related events where learning a language is not the main purpose. Methodology of the study comprises the analysis of student feedback collected after the events they participated in during the period of 2012-2013. Two instruments of feedback collection were used in the study: students’ feedback on the language promotion event, students’ reactions and comments provided in the on-line feedback forms after the event (n=352) as well as semi-structured interviews with a focus group, i.e. leaders and most active members of different language clubs, cultural event organisers and participants (n=18). The study presents the research findings with regard to students’ evaluation of the organisation of event, its impact upon the person’s worldview, communicative competence development, aroused motivation to learn the language of the event, positive attitude towards different cultures and socialising. Though informal learning instances are hard to capture, some implications can be drawn with regard to the importance of providing language learners with informal opportunities for naturalistic practising of the target language.

Keywords: Informal language learning, extracurricular events, implicit learning, language and culture related events.

1 INTRODUCTION

The importance of foreign language competences has been emphasised more strongly as ever before as the impact of globalisation manifested by mobility, migration, internationalisation urges citizens to have competences in several languages. Learning of foreign languages was included in the list of the basic skills in the Lisbon Council Strategy [1] and has been on the agenda since [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], etc. However, the focus on early language learning and learning languages at secondary education level has been given a priority area with less attention paid to language provision in vocational or higher education. “Given the smaller number of young people entering education and the goal to reach all citizens, increased focus is now needed on updating adults’ language competencies throughout their lives” [4].

The implementation of language policy requires different forms of learning and teaching, which can be provided in formal, non-formal and informal learning settings. The spread of ICT, media and new language technologies have been great sources of informal language learning. This study addresses the issue of plurilingual competence development from the perspective of informal learning, namely, investigating the provision of extracurricular language and culture promotion activities as informal learning settings and their impact upon the acquisition of foreign language and intercultural competence.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Informal learning is the oldest form of learning and the first one, received in the infancy and lasting throughout a person’s lifetime. However, the recognition of the concept has gained momentum presumably since its definition in the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning [8] which provided three basic categories of purposeful learning activity: formal, non-formal and informal learning, being
described as “a natural accompaniment to everyday life. Unlike formal and non-formal learning, informal learning is not necessarily intentional learning, and so may well not be recognised even by individuals themselves as contributing to their knowledge and skills” (p.8). It is further elaborated in the Memorandum that informal learning has been particularly enhanced by the advance of information technologies and that informal contexts can serve as enormous learning reservoirs and be an important source of innovation for teaching and learning methods [8].

In the glossary on the Quality in education and training, provided by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training [9], the concept is defined as “learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure, <…> not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support, <…> in most cases unintentional from the learner’s perspective <…>. Informal learning is also referred to as experiential or incidental/random learning”.

2.1 Overview of informal learning theories

The conceptual framework of the study is grounded in informal learning theories [10], [11] which relate informal learning to implicit learning, experiential learning, and the acquisition of tacit knowledge and sociocultural theory of learning [12] which emphasises the role of socialising and interaction for the acquisition of language competence.

Malcolm Knowles, the founder of the theory of andragogy, found inspiration and understanding of adult learner needs having been engaged in various extracurricular activities and voluntary services himself while being a student at Harvard university: he was the president and leader of some clubs, agencies, leagues; his first book *Informal adult education*, published in 1950, and his subsequent writings laid the foundation of adult education philosophy in the US, which is based on the assumption that education should help adults learn, should be based on their needs, active engagement and commitment.

Knowles contrasted formal and informal learning experiences by stating that “an organized course is usually a better instrument for ‘new learning of an intensive nature, while a club experience provides the best opportunity for practicing and refining the things learned’ [10].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal, organised classes</th>
<th>Informal learning activities (clubs, forums)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Stable, long-term interests</td>
<td>Transitory interests, flexible</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limited to a single subject-matter area</td>
<td>Useful instruments for arousing interests</td>
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<tr>
<td>Require more commitment of time money and energy from participants</td>
<td>Range from pure entertainment to serious lectures</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Require less commitment of time money and energy from participants</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Settings were adults affiliate voluntarily, learning to live co-operatively</td>
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For the purposes of this study only the ideas that support informal learning in various extracurricular activities have been chosen without addressing any other important issues of andragogy theory to which Knowles contributed.

According to Cross [11], we learn to be able to successfully participate in life, but actual learning to do our job comes from informal learning experiences, which are “unofficial, unscheduled, impromptu” ways of learning. Examples of such IL are as follows: “learning through observing, trial-and-error, calling the help line, asking a neighbour, travelling to a new place, reading a magazine, conversing with others, taking part in a group, composing a story, reflecting on the day’s events, burning your finger on a hot stove, awakening with an inspiration, raising a child, visiting a museum, or pursuing a hobby” (p. 17), i.e. all natural, authentic real life activities in which our theoretical knowledge is put to practice, practical skills are exercised to achieve the goals we want to achieve. Informal learning is a highly natural practice because it is deeply rooted in our daily behaviour; spontaneous relations, interactions and conversations support informal learning practices, contributing to the creation and transmission of knowledge. Speaking about innovation, Cross [11] maintains the idea, that we need new approaches to respond to changes, and here conversations come into focus, i.e. we have to
discuss and encourage meaningful conversations if we want to generate new ideas and spark innovations. Another important idea emerging from the enhancement of IL, as suggested by Cross [13], concerns the creation of ‘learnscapes’ which are the spaces, areas for informal learning to happen. We have to make spaces, social spaces for people to get together and for informal learning to emerge. He also states that the work of the future is knowledge work. The knowledge workers take initiative and responsibility for their work, work best in social networks. Knowledge workers need spaces for thinking and conceiving; designing, presenting, collaborating, debating and negotiating, implementing, practicing, sensing and operating (p. 45). Such skills can be developed in both, formal and, particularly, in informal learning settings.

Alan Rogers [14], defining IL as all incidental, unstructured, unpurposeful learning and calling it to be the most extensive and important part of all learning in our life, proposes a distinction between two kinds of learning: ‘task-conscious’ and ‘learning-conscious’ learning. If we want to be efficient in teaching adults we have to take the sense of identity that they bring to learning, we have to know and ensure natural learning practices and processes. Marcick and Watkins [15] analyse informal and incidental learning defining the latter as a by-product of some other activity, such as task accomplishment, interpersonal interaction, etc. and the former as usually intentional but not highly structured. The authors provide conclusions that are applicable in language education as well: by providing opportunities for interaction and sharing, it is possible to build on the natural enthusiasm for learning.

2.2 Overview of informal language learning

2.2.1 Innovative language learning practices

A number of various language projects, supported by different programmes of the European Commission, have been designed and implemented, which focused on creating opportunities for informal language learning for learners of different age groups, aiming at protecting and promoting regional and minority languages, languages in specific areas and for specific purposes, enhancing multilingualism in various formal, informal and non-formal surroundings. Language projects have fostered awareness of other languages and cultures among marginalised groups, deaf sign language users, visually impaired, involved virtual journeys around Europe, promoted language learning in unusual locations (such as airports, public transport), with unusual learners (such as grandparents and grandchildren, toddlers’ clubs), offered interactive learning opportunities, etc. [16]. The contribution of such projects to the learning of languages and triggering motivation is immense, the significance of such projects is unquestionable; however, these initiatives usually last within the period of the project and through its dissemination and valorisation stages. The focus of this study is to discuss innovative measures used to supplement language learning offered in formal surroundings by creating opportunities for students to engage in informal learning opportunities.

2.2.2 Formal and Informal Linguistic environments in language acquisition and learning

The importance of informal environment for language competence development has been stressed for a number of years. More than three decades ago, Stephen Krashen [17], a proponent of Natural Language approach, discussed the optimal linguistic environment for adult learners, differentiating between artificial (formal) and natural (informal) environments, and stressed that informal environment (hereinafter, IE) provides opportunities to acquire the language subconsciously, but for this to happen, IE must be “intensive and involve the learner directly in order to be effective”. Two types of IEs “exposure-type” and “intake-type” were distinguished, noting that only the latter IE provides the basis for language acquisition as it involves active involvement of learners.

The importance of sociocultural perspective on human learning, created by Vygotsky [12], is of utmost importance considering informal language learning and creating opportunities for it to happen. Vygotsky’s idea that learning is a social process and that social interaction plays a crucial role in the development of cognition, emphasises the importance of social interaction in learning, of creating socially rich environments; he proposed the term ‘zone of proximal development’ by stating that progress in learning is achieved only through collaboration, discourse, scaffolding provided by others.

Lightbown and Spada [18] describe informal environment as a context in which the learners are exposed to the target language in any place outside the school, which involves social interaction and the focus on meaning rather than learning context.
In this study informal language learning is used in terms of creating and sharing foreign language knowledge, skills and attitudes while actively interacting, cooperating and collaborating among social event participants in various language and culture related events where learning a language is not the main purpose.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Statement of the problem

Studying a language as a foreign one, i.e. in a country where the target language is not used in daily communication and where the access to practising the target language in naturalistic settings and real life situations is mainly available only through media and IT, it is important to create such opportunities for students to interact in a face-to-face mode in informal environment. The initiative to organise various language and culture related events and club activities arose from the students themselves; therefore, having acquired a certain amount of experience in exposing learners to communication in informal setting it was purposeful to summarise such experience and find out if participation as well as organisation of language and culture related extracurricular activities is understood by learners as informal language learning and if yes, how students self-assess the impact of such events upon their own learning and language competence development.

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Participants

Participants of the research were the students of Vytautas Magnus University, who participated in various language and culture related events, organised such events, initiated the establishment of various language related clubs and engaged in their activities and provided their opinion on the impact of these events upon informal language learning.

3.2.2 Instruments

Two instruments of feedback collection were used in the study: students’ feedback after the language promotion event filling in online evaluation in 2012 (n=180) and 2013 (n=172), and semi-structured interviews for focus groups which were formed from the leaders and most active members of different language clubs, cultural event organisers and participants (n= 18). A framework for evaluating informal learning was adapted from Saul Carliner’s Informal Learning Basics [19].

3.2.3 Procedure

First, the description of opportunities for informal language learning created at Vytautas Magnus University (VMU), Lithuania, will be described, providing data on language promotion events, language and culture clubs founded at the students’ initiative and chaired by students themselves; describing culture events that enhance cultural awareness; analysing presentations and interpretations of creative literature reading; meetings and collaboration with international students; meetings with famous native speakers for language promotion and, finally, learning by doing or collaborative preparation of learning material.

Then, students’ opinion on the above mentioned events will be presented and their responses from focus group interviews will be analysed. Focus groups were formed to carry out semi-structured conversations with a smaller number of people seeking to obtain richer insights into particular situations. The responses were open rather than selected from a predetermined list of items, if necessary, the interviewers (the authors of the present study) asked participants to clarify and expand on their responses.
4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Description of opportunities for informal language learning created at Vytautas Magnus University

4.1.1 Language promotion events

At the beginning of each academic year the first year students of the first-cycle of studies are invited to the orientation days “Introduction to studies at VMU”, which are rich in various events introducing students to the university system, traditions, faculty staff, senior students and language learning options. The latter part of the orientation days is the responsibility of the Institute of Foreign Language which is carried out by offering students a number of activities. First of all, a series of mini lectures “How to learn languages” are delivered to the students focusing on practical learning-related issues, such as using virtual learning environments, working with the dictionaries or applying learning strategies. Then short workshops for ‘trying’ the languages or their different levels are arranged to help students to decide on their language learning preferences. Finally, meetings and consultations with language teachers serve as an important first step to join the language classes.

4.1.2 Language and Culture clubs

To open space for students’ initiatives, which could enable and enhance language learning outside classrooms, the Institute of Foreign Languages at Vytautas Magnus University encourages and supports the establishment of Language and Culture Clubs. Over the last two years 5 Language and Culture Clubs were established and have been successfully implementing language- and culture-related activities. The clubs include:

(1) “Diwan” – a gathering of students and other members of the university community interested in the studies of oriental culture and the Middle East languages such as Turkish, Kirgiz and Arab which are offered and taught at VMU;

(2) “Pessoa(s)” – the club of Portuguese language and culture, the name of which carries double semantics by making reference to a famous Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa and a Portuguese word ‘person’, in that way, extending a welcoming message to every person to join the club activities;

(3) Miguel de Cervantes Club devoted to the Spanish language and other languages spoken in Spain as well as the rich cultural variety of Spain and the Spanish speaking world,

(4) Lithuanian Sign Language and Deaf Culture Club aiming to raise people’s awareness of the forms deaf people employ to communicate not only their daily routines but also their world views and cultural uniqueness to the general public.

(5) Adam Mickiewicz Polish Language and Culture Club aims at expanding student and community knowledge of the Polish culture and thereby strengthening the cultural and linguistic ties between Poland and Lithuania, two neighbouring countries.

4.1.3 Culture events for enhanced intercultural awareness

Building broad cultural and social awareness of a language that is being learnt is inevitable for the development of sound intercultural and sociolinguistic competence. To achieve this aim the Institute initiates extracurricular lectures delivered by the scholars who are native to the given language and culture or in other ways rich in the corresponding expertise. For example, to support the learning of Spanish, extracurricular lectures on the linguistic and cultural variability associated with its regions are introduced on a regular basis. For instance, in 2012 a lecture “Unity and diversity. State and Autonomy” delivered by a Spanish lecturer Alfonso Rascón Caballero was not only a possibility for learners to broaden their knowledge about the regional diversity and specificity of Spain but also to listen to the lecture given by a professor from another institution and practice asking questions in Spanish. Another type of language- and culture-related lectures could be exemplified with a speech on multiculturalism and multilingualism of Spain given by the former Lithuanian Ambassador Mečys Laurinkus, who transmitted a different type of experience to the learners, namely, a view of a cultural outsider having lived in the country for a long time.
4.1.4 Creative literature reading: presentations and interpretations

It has been generally assumed that the times of a digital generation have significantly altered learning styles successfully placing an ever increasing emphasis on the incorporation of ICT and steadily turning away from traditional reading of books. Under these circumstances, extracurricular activities of public literature reading, book presentations, subsequent discussions, excerpt role-playing and other activities of active listening and reading have become important targets of informal learning. The examples of such activities initiated by the Institute include a tandem lecture-presentation of a Norwegian novel “Ellevte roman, bok atten” by the author a famous contemporary Norwegian writer Dag Solstad and the translator of the novel into the Lithuanian language Ugnius Mikučionis, who is also a teacher of Norwegian at the Institute of Foreign languages.

Similarly, two selections of poems written by the teacher of Portuguese Nuno Guimaraes and their translations into Lithuanian and English were presented in the years 2010 and 2013 through the inspiring readings of the poems in all languages by the author, the translator and the students. Such reading of poems developed into two types of important synergies: the cultural and the linguistic. The cultural one resulted from the reading activity being coupled with the activity of drawing pictures featuring the impressions of Portugal arisen in the imaginations of students from the listening to the poems. The linguistic synergy was achieved through the poet/ teacher’s initiative to encourage students to write poems in their native language or English, to translate them into Portuguese with the help of the teacher and to present them at this informal literature reading event.

An even more active involvement in the interpretation of literature texts has been achieved through the activities of students’ role-playings of excerpts from famous works of literature in their target language. In 2013, Miguel de Cervantes Spanish language and culture club held the reading event of the famous Spanish literary masterpiece Don Quixote in the original. Given that the majority in the audience had rather inadequate competence for full understanding of the original Spanish text, members of the Cervantes language and culture club conveyed the message through their performance of the events depicted in the reading. As a result, it was a highly entertaining as well as linguistically educational event. Along the same lines, students of French had an opportunity of active reading and interpretation of Albert Camus texts by staging a performance to express the message they have gained from the book. In their endeavours the students were guided by a native speaker of French Joelle Aubert.

4.1.5 Meetings and collaboration with international students

Collaboration in organising and implementing projects by teams of students from different countries is another specific aspect of informal language learning at VMU. In the annual Spanish culture festival called “Primavera en español” most of events are planned, organised and carried out by such teams working together. In that way, in 2012, the cultural and linguistic mosaic of Spanish regions such as Galicia, Cantabria, Andalucía, Rioja, Castilla and Leon and the Basque country was presented as a product of mutual work which resulted from sharing the experience of those who are native to the language and the culture and those who are eager to advance their primary knowledge gained through formal class work. Likewise, the tradition of annual celebration of the European Day of Languages has been largely implemented by joint student teams. In 2012, the Institute offered a unique event for the occasion of the European Day of Languages, namely a multilingual public lesson where the word ‘freedom’ was taught in 33 languages to an audience of 520 university and gymnasium students gathered in a square adjacent to the University premises. The majority of the ‘teachers’ of this multilingual lesson were foreign students -- native to the languages used for the lesson. Given that the aim of this event was not only to introduce the word in different languages, but also to teach the audience the various connotations that this word carries in different cultures, the native users’ insights provided by the international students were especially valuable.

4.1.6 Meetings with famous native speakers for language promotion

As the Latin saying goes, “verba docent, exempla trahunt”. Extracurricular activities serve as a fertile soil to expose examples of language use to learners of these languages. In 2012, the Institute aimed to include Catalan into the list of languages offered to the university community and the public. For that purpose, a decision was made to set a Catalan culture event featuring a famous representative of this region of Spain to promote the introduction of Catalan into the language offer of the Institute. As a result, a Catalan basketball coach, at that time holding the position at BC Zalgiris, Kaunas, and a novelist Joan Plaza was invited and the topic of the event “Spain and its Regional Multiculturalism. Catalonia” was developed to best correspond to the aims of the event. The event itself revolved
around a variety of cultural, social and linguistic aspects of the region eventually resulting in a broad and versatile picture presented for the future learners of Catalan. Soaked in the speaker’s rich personal experience, artefacts of Catalan culture such as Castell human towers, Gaudi architectural masterpieces, BC Barcelona and others were presented on the screen or demonstrated live by the speaker himself like, for instance, the Catalan dance Sardana learnt by the speaker in his early age. Although the event took place in English, the audience had a chance to give their questions and to join the discussion in Spanish or Catalan (some students had acquired very basic Catalan during Erasmus stays in Catalan universities). The introduction of Catalan was successful not only judging by the fact that 21 students enrolled in the group of A1 the subsequent semester, but also by the choice of two students to take the standardised Catalan test (offered by the Institute Ramon LLull) at the end of the course.

4.1.7 Learning by doing: collaborative preparation of learning materials

Since the introduction of the Portuguese language into the language offer of the Institute in 2009, the formal learning process of Portuguese was closely interrelated with extracurricular activities. In addition to the above mentioned poetry presentations, where students took active participation in writing and reading their own poems, other events included Portuguese film viewings in the original language with English subtitles as well as exhibitions of pictures by Portuguese artists and pictures of Portugal by Lithuanian artists. Above all, however, the collaboration of learners of Portuguese in creating the video learning materials has to be singled out as the activity extending most impact on the development of communicative and sociolinguistic competence. The project called „Falo eu – Aš kalbu” (Eng.”I am talking”) entailed a number of genres and lasted for several semesters. The project that combined elements of puppet theatre and news coverage resulted in 11 video shots where puppets operated by learners of Portuguese give questions to a native Portuguese speaker, who acts as a news reporter, to discuss various issues related to the local news of Kaunas and the broader context of Lithuanian and Portuguese culture. The Video shots were recorded in Portuguese and subtitled in Lithuanian to result in a valuable bilingual learning material for new learners as well as in a highly appreciable communicative gain for the students who participated in this project.

4.2 Informal language learning through extracurricular activities: students’ perspective

4.2.1 Students’ feedback on language promotion events

As said before, the framework for evaluating informal learning was adapted from Saul Carliner’s Informal Learning Basics [19]. Student opinion surveys administered after the language promotion events aimed at identifying the students' opinion on the following aspects:

Usefulness of the event in terms of satisfaction or the extent to which the students feel the event met their expectations.

Participation – if they participated in a number of language promotion events, to what extent, why? why not?

The surveys administered to the first year students after their participation in the orientation week events include questions on the efficiency and usefulness of language promotion events. Out of 348 first year students who participated in the orientation week organised in 2013, 172 participated in language promotion events. 75% (129) of them expressed their overall positive impression and evaluated language promotion events as useful, efficient and well-organised (in 2012 this opinion was expressed by 85% of the participants); about 20% (34) evaluated the organisation of events and their content positively, however, did not see much impact of these events upon their language choice or language learning at the university, and only 5.2% (9 students) admitted that the participation in the events was not useful. The answers to the open questions revealed that participation in these events was limited to simultaneous provision of different events, i.e. a number of other events were organised in the university at the same time and this prevented students from more active participation in language promotion events.

4.2.2 Students’ feedback in focus groups on participation in club activities and organisation of culture- and language-related events

To evaluate the impact of extracurricular activities on language learning it is indispensable to analyse learners’ attitudes and opinions based on their own experience. For that purpose, the focus group of
18 students, the leaders and most active members of the above presented clubs, were interviewed to obtain information on the impact of the club activities upon the development of the communicative, pragmatic and sociolinguistic competences of the learners who come to participate in such activities. Though informal learning instances are hard to capture, some implications can be drawn with regard to the importance of providing language learners with informal opportunities for naturalistic practising of the target language.

**Extent of participation in organising activities and general opinion about the club’s activities in the context of language and culture acquisition**

Learners report a broad variety of activities in which they are involved as members of language and culture clubs, namely organising events such as culture trips, meetings with famous people, film viewings and other activities, designing posters for the culture events, writing projects, serving as an interpreter and performing other tasks. The respondents stress that active participation in organising club events and not just being passive invigilators can make a substantial influence on communicative competence development. For instance, a student engaged in the activities of Adam Mickiewicz Polish Language and Culture Club expresses his appreciation of the cooperation established by the club with the journal “Goniec Litweski” published in Poland. On the basis of this cooperation, the student had a possibility to have his articles published in the journal, which helped him to improve his creative writing skills. The overall evaluation of the club activities could be summarised in the following words of the respondents:

- **Club activities make language learning more versatile, by opening access to creative language learning as well as to the improvement of socio-cultural and sociolinguistic competences;**
- **In the classrooms we learn language, while the acquisition of culture is achieved through club activities – in terms of culture, club activities are highly enriching;**
- **Participation in club activities importantly allows one to learn more about the country of the target language;**
- **Discussions, cooperation as well as sharing common worldviews and common interests among club members is of utmost importance and this also helps to improve our linguistic competence;**
- **Club activities entail language learning in a pleasant and self-motivated way and provide us with a space for the practical application of competences acquired in the classrooms;**
- **In addition to linguistic competences, participation in club activities helps to improve other skills such as collaborative work, establishing new contacts and organisational skills.**

**Impact of participation in language and culture club activities upon motivation to study languages**

Participation in language and culture clubs broadens learners’ cultural understanding by simultaneously motivating them to start learning new languages and to discover new cultures. A tendency for students to engage in the activities of other language clubs once they become active members of one club could be seen as evidence to support the claim above. This tendency is especially observable among the members of Spanish and Portuguese clubs. Members of the Polish language and culture club reveal that the club also organises presentations of other Slavic languages, which serve as a good motivating factor to start learning other Slavic languages in addition to Polish.

According to the respondents, it also motivates to learn languages, especially to advance one’s communicative competence, when learning is liberated from the constraints of the classroom. The egalitarian atmosphere of club work is an important motivating factor. The clubs are believed to make every effort to create situations for spontaneous language use where participants of different levels of language competences can join in. Finally, the information seminars and meetings with the representatives of business companies organised by the clubs, in most cases in cooperation with the Institute of Foreign Languages, disseminate useful information about the increased study and employment possibilities for those who have competence of particular languages. This also functions as a significant motivating factor for language learning.

**Impact of participation in the club activities upon language learning and development of communicative skills**

Collaborative work is singled out as the most influential activity on the development of various linguistic skills. Organising events involves much communication; therefore, less advanced learners benefit from listening to and communicating with the more advanced learners. Moreover, common...
activities lead to the improvement of lexical repertoire, i.e. when one comes across a new word, collocation or stretch of talk, common efforts of club members help to clarify the meaning and set lexical items into an accepted pattern of usage. Most of the respondents also emphasise that the lexical repertoire of the target language substantially benefits from film viewings which are regularly added to the agenda of club activities. In general, arranging club events helps learners to advance in the spoken everyday register. As indicated by one of the respondents, from the psychological perspective engagement in organising club events allows learners ‘to break the barrier of fear’ to communicate in the target language. Such a barrier appears to be quite typical of Lithuanian learners, thus, overcoming it is an important function that extracurricular activities help to serve.

The impact (communicative, cultural) of participation in the club activities together with foreign students

The fact that language and culture club activities unite multilingual and multicultural groups of learners has a twofold impact. On the one hand, learners highlight the importance of interaction with students who are native to the particular languages and cultures. As put by one of the respondents, having native speakers in club activities helps other learners to develop a special touch with the language, i.e. the feeling of closeness and deeper understanding. On the other hand, Lithuanian respondents observe that the involvement of students with different cultural and linguistic background, not necessarily the native speakers of the target language, increases the significance of that language in the eyes of Lithuanian learners. In other word, positive effect is achieved when, for instance, an interest in Polish language and culture shown by the Lithuanian initiators of Adam Mickiewicz Polish Language and Culture Club is also shared by students from Germany, Russia or such far away countries as Korea or Japan. This sharing of interests develops the perception of unity and adds value to one’s learning aspirations. It also creates opportunities to pool in everybody’s versatile experience on the basis of which new practices and knowledge can grow.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study has opted to analyse the role and the impact of extracurricular activities on the informal language learning in higher education. As the departure point, the study took into consideration the situation of learning a language as a foreign one, which entails the problem of the absence of naturalistic settings and real life circumstances for the active use of the target language and the subsequent need to create such settings via extracurricular activities. The description of opportunities for informal language learning created at Vytautas Magnus University has proved that extracurricular activities play a major role in the development of the communicative competence at its various dimensions: the linguistic, the sociocultural, the pragmatic and the intercultural. Moreover, on the basis of VMU case study, it can be concluded that only a broad spectrum of extracurricular activities can yield positive results in satisfying the language learning needs in higher education. Similar conclusions are supported by the qualitative analysis of the focus group answers, namely only a broad spectrum approach can guarantee a full-fledged improvement of communicative competence given that different extracurricular activities fill in different components in its development. Firstly, active participation in the club activities in arranging language and culture events help learners to advance their spoken interaction and break through communication barriers. Secondly, film viewings, literature readings and poetry translation into and from the target language fill in the important lexical element. Thirdly, cooperation within multicultural and multilingual groups supplies learners with the necessary experience at the intercultural dimension. Consequently, a colourful and congruent mosaic of a communicative competence cannot be acquired by exclusively formal language learning process, nor can it be achieved by the introduction of sporadic and irregular opportunities for informal learning. Only a planned and multifaceted range of extracurricular activities can lead to nurturing university graduates enriched with sustainable plurilingual competence and the necessary skills for its further dynamic application.

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