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The systemic approach to language acquisition as a way to European linguistic unity and lifelong learning

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Abstract

During the last two decades, the European Commission and the Council of Europe have taken initiatives to promote multilingualism. The underlying assumption to encourage multilingualism is the need to find a balance between an integrated identity as a European citizen and the necessity of maintaining linguistic and cultural diversity. At the same time, cultural and linguistic diversity within Europe stimulates the development of linguistic unity, which is fundamental to the European integration.

Fostering positive intercultural communication requires the development of effective communicative competence, which comprises continuous emotional adjustment to the cultural differences with which we engage in the process of social interaction. To make the process challenging, common interest must be placed over difference.

Keywords: Systemic Approach, Language Acquisition, Lifelong Learning, Active Citizenship.

The European community needs to build a new inclusive and diverse European culture that selectively employs all the useful and functional aspects of our commonalities and our differences. All the constituent cultures with their experiences and lessons learned, need to contribute to the constructive humane design of the European Union, and higher education has a pivotal role to play in this process.

The concepts of belonging to the European community, of interdependence, of sharing a common language for communication, of connectedness and togetherness have the potential of paving the way to a one single in-group and European identity (where cultural paradigms that teach how to keep out-groups out, would be counterproductive in this context).

As international educational environment is expanding dramatically and more and more students are getting enrolled in the ERASMUS student exchange programme, the question of effective intercultural communication, adjustment, and adaptation acquires its vital urgency. Furthermore, the ERASMUS programme itself is developing extensively, encompassing not only European students but also students from Africa, India, China, and other Asian countries, distinguished by their distinctive cultures.

Intercultural communication is a branch of educational language practice at Information Systems Management University (ISMA) in Riga (Latvia) that has a particular responsibility to discuss how this process can be guided fruitfully.

A Systemic perspective on language, emotion and intercultural communication

Within the framework of the present research, the Systemic approach has been implemented to develop students' communicative language competence comprising different fields of knowledge and sciences, and touching various sides of life, where interdisciplinary synthesis of academic subjects provides a background not only for developing professional and communicative language competences, but also for personality growth and maturation. Thus, we hypothesize that the systemic vision will contribute to the achievement of educational goals, the development of European linguistic unity, active citizenship, and lifelong learning.

To think systemically, integrally means to nurture the development of the whole person (Miller R., 2006) and be comprehensive, inclusive and balanced in the process (Wilber K., 2006).

Intercultural communication, according to German sociologist Niklas Luhman, can be defined in terms of interactive construction of meaning (Luhmann, 1990). From the systemic perspective, it is the unity of three constituent components: *information* (provided by teachers possessing knowledge) – *utterance* (by means of language that is usually coloured with a certain emotional connotational meaning) – *understanding* (a kind of created 'identical' thinking) to which is added the *acceptance* or *rejection* of the receiver to continue communication and interaction (see Figure 1).
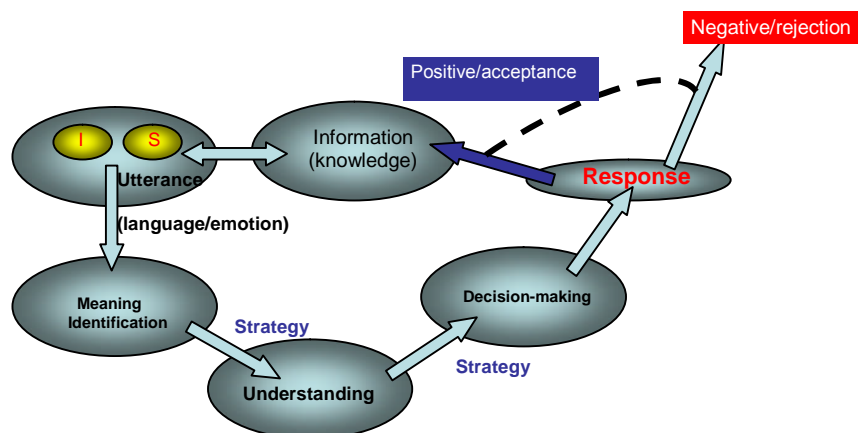
Figure 1. Language and emotion as major determinants of successful interaction.

European integration is only possible on the grounds of mutual understanding among people coming from different cultural backgrounds. At the same time, understanding can be reached by means of communicating to us not only facts and ideas but also feelings, emotions and assumptions of other people to construct 'identical' thinking. In practice it means, that all Europeans have to possess a good knowledge of a common language – the English language, presumably, to provide common frames for mutual understanding.

Identity development from the Systemic level of observation.

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Language and our emotional reactions on the heard, seen or experienced determine the way of our thinking and, consequently, our ability to understand other people. However, understanding cannot be reduced either to a purely emotional or to a solely cognitive aspect. Its affective component is enhanced by a cognitive one, which together stipulate the 'identity' of mental processes and 'reconstruction' of the inner world of a person, leading to the ability to empathize, to be sensitive to feelings of other people and to foresee their emotional reactions.

Anthony Giddens, a British sociologist, points out that people are always to some extent knowledgeable about what they are doing (Giddens, 1998). Because people are reflexive and monitor the ongoing flow of information, activities, and conditions, they adapt their actions/behaviour to their evolving understanding. As a result, **knowledge changes human activities/behaviour, thus, shaping a person's self-identity** (Figure 2). Language, in this respect, can act as a constraint on action/behavior, but at the same time, it also enables action by providing common frames for mutual understanding if negative emotions are under control.
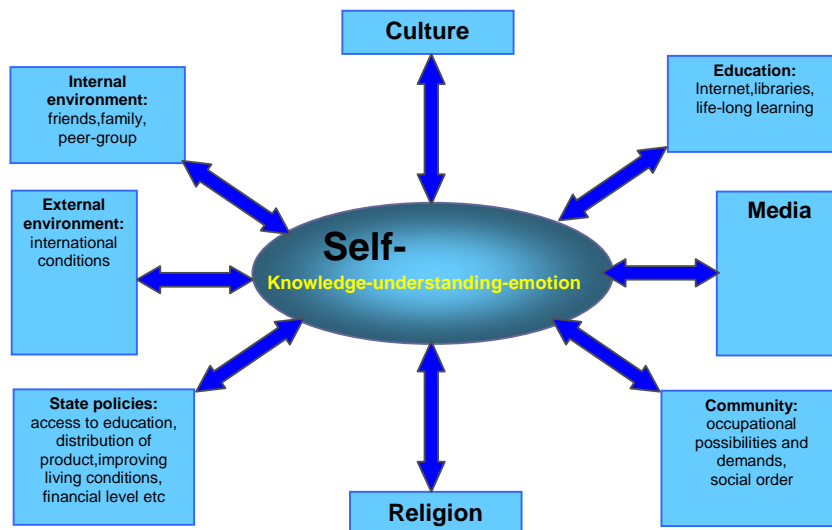
Figure 2. Self-identity development as a person's reflexive project.

Self-identity is not inherited or static. It rather becomes a reflexive project - an endeavour, which we continuously work out and reflect on. It is not a set of observable characteristics of a moment, but becomes an account of a person's life. 'A person's identity is neither to be found in behaviour, nor in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular interaction going' (Giddens, 1998). More than ever before we have access to information that allows us to reflect on the causes and consequences of our actions/behaviour and we are free to choose what we want to do and what we want to be.

From theory to practice

Despite the fact that a number of studies have demonstrated that emotion recognition and their regulation are related to adjustment, no study has examined this relationship in the ERASMUS international students sojourning in Latvia. Examining future predictive ability of emotion recognition and regulation can have important implications for improving intercultural adjustment. It can also provide a deeper insight into the effectiveness of the emotion-related educational process on intercultural adjustment because emotion recognition and regulation skills can be taught.

For a long time emotions have been ignored in the academic practice of higher education and, as a result, we have overlooked a great deal of potential in our students, which are manifested as lack of motivation, first of all, as well as, problems with intercultural communication, adjustment and adaptation in an unfamiliar cultural environment.

To improve the situation, we have undertaken at Information Systems Management University (ISMA) in Riga (Latvia) a set of researches into the nature of emotional potential development in order to provide the necessary knowledge, understanding and support to our students to be successfully introduced to the multicultural environment of today's life, to adjust and adapt in it.

It is worth reminding some of the key concepts from our previous research (Lobanova and Shunin Yu. 2009). The terms intercultural adjustment and adaptation have been defined by many scientists and researchers in different ways (eg. Black & Gregersen - 1991, Ward & Kennedy – 1994, Matsumoto & LeRoux - 2001,).

We define *adaptation* – as a process of altering one's behaviors or cognitions in relation to a different socio-cultural environment, in order to feel comfortable and to better interact with the environment to achieve the desired end goals.

Adjustment is viewed as psychological/emotional outcomes (positive and negative) that are associated with adaptation. *Positive adjustment outcomes* include such aspects as gains in language proficiency, self-esteem, intercultural awareness, self-confidence, positive mood and positive thinking, good interpersonal relationships and stress reduction. *Negative adjustment outcomes* include emotional distress, culture shock, dysfunctional communication, depression, anxiety, diminished school and work performance, difficulties in interpersonal relationships, and, as a result, early return to the home country.

Our previous research, which just determined a tendency in the relationship between language learning and emotional potential development, has consistently demonstrated that *'language proficiency related to the ability to control emotional reactions – is a key factor for successful intercultural communication, adjustment, and adaptation'*.

However, our previous research had some limitations:
- The focus was on the *local* students going to study abroad – at Birmingham University College.
- Reliance was on students' *self-report* (while there is nothing wrong with self-report measures, still, the total reliance on them in assessing adjustment may be

problematic. In particular, adjustment outcomes can be measured not only by self-report but also by behaviors in class tasks, and not only by self-rating but also by peers and teachers.

- We overlooked international students enrolled in ISMA on the ERASMUS student exchange programme. (As a result, international students experienced significant difficulties during their early adjustment stage including educational system differences, cultural differences, language challenges (problems with their English skills), food incompatibilities, living practicalities, time management, and social integration. They all left after one semester, probably not cherishing sweet memories about their stay in Latvia.).

We addressed limitations of the previous research by involving international students as well as local students into group tasks in the classes, where self-, peer- and teacher-ratings of social behaviors related to adjustment and communicative interaction processes were made with the aim:

- to investigate the process of adjustment and adaptation of international students in Latvia (in the educational environment at ISMA);
- to provide the future predictive evidence for the local students either going to summer practice abroad or to study on the ERASMUS program in Birmingham;
- to examine how the developed linguo-didactic Learning Curve model, supported by the COMPAS modular program with the emphasis on emotional potential development, contribute to students' emotion regulation skill acquisition.

At the beginning of the autumn semester, we launched a pilot study in two groups of 29 students. An experimental group was a mixed-nationality group studying together with ERASMUS students with language education based on the linguo-didactic *Learning Curve* model supported by the COMPAS modular programme with a special emphasis on emotional potential development. They all had different cultural backgrounds and different English language competences.

A control group was a group of local students with language education based on the traditional methodology. They were Pre-Intermediate – Intermediate students.

To help international students adapt to new educational and cultural conditions, the first step was to create a lively educational language environment, which would foster language acquisition and play a significant role in shaping a behavioral pattern. A variety of communicative activities was employed such as case study, problem solving, decision-making, discussions, role plays, to mention just a few. Video recording was used to provide objective self-, peer-, and teacher assessment.

The second step was to provide knowledge about different countries' cultures and their typical emotional reactions in different social situations, to help students gain a deeper understanding of emotion regulation as a process by which individuals can influence which emotions they choose to have when they feel them and how they experience and express these emotions.

We believe that such kind of understanding will help students prevent themselves from choosing negative emotions when dealing with cultural differences and instead think clearly and constructively, which then opens the way for using such important skills for intercultural adjustment as openness, flexibility, critical thinking, and empathy.

After a month of studies, we launched an establishing experiment, which has revealed that students in both groups possess rather insufficient levels of emotional potential development - the overall 32% of emotional potential development in the experimental group and 33% - in the control group.

At the end of the autumn semester, *The Test of General Emotional Intelligence* (which was described in our previous research), comprising 55 statements with three options for each, ranging from positive/correct through moderate to negative, was administered in both groups.

We implemented our developed *Successful Communication Emotional Potential Scale* (SCEPS) and created scores for each of these scales (3-high, 2-moderate, 1-low). The factor analyses using normative data (n=58) suggested that five factors underlay the SCEPS – Emotion Regulation (ER), Critical Thinking (CT), Empathy (EM), Openness (OP), and Flexibility (FL).

The item pool was supported by research interviews, discussions, observations of role plays, case studies, problem solving, and video recordings. The research utilized an inclusive criterion-referenced TOEIC test as a measurement tool of student achievements in language proficiency.

We computed correlation between these independent tests by means of a transformation matrix. The research findings have proved that students of the experimental group have demonstrated the overall 43% of their emotional potential development, while students of the control group – 35%.

Taking into consideration that the pilot study lasted only for three months, the results in the experimental group seem to be encouraging. As we can see from the graphs (Figures 3 and 4), after the implementation of the linguo-didactic Learning Curve model and the modular programme COMPAS, students of the experimental group demonstrated significant positive changes in their emotional potential development, while in the control group the changes were very insignificant. In fact, most of the students in the experimental group adequately accepted and comprehended the educational material, thus, showing positive changes in their emotional reactions and proving the ability to control them. The results outline a certain tendency that proves the advantage of the Learning Curve model and the modular programme COMPAS over the traditional methodology of language education.
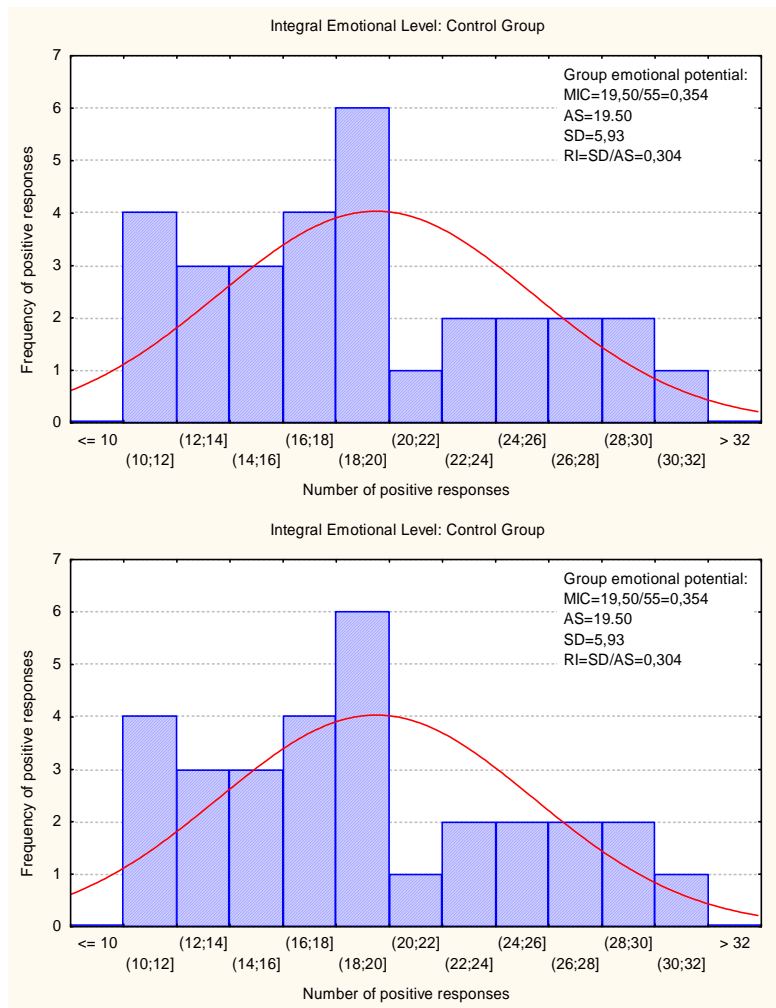
Figure 3. Overall emotional potential development
in experimental and control groups: (SCEPS) - ER, CT, EM, OP, FL.
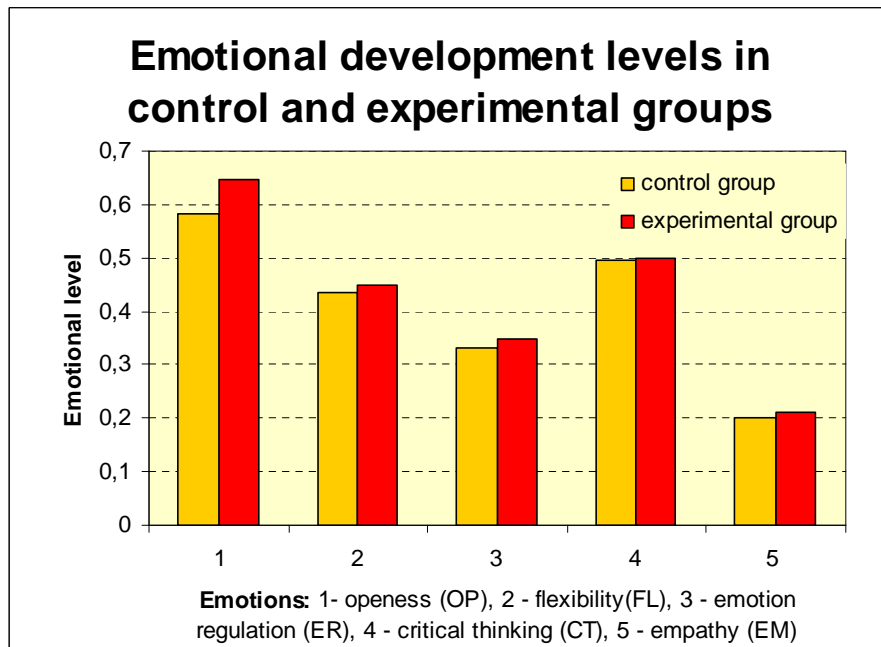
Figure 4. Comparative Emotional Potential Development in the experimental and control groups

The next graph (Figure 5) shows the upper descending lines reflecting the emotional competence indices in both groups with the underlying factors: Openness (OP — in the experimental group - 65%; in the control group – 58%), Flexibility (FL - in the experimental group - 45%; in the control group – 43%), Emotion Regulation (ER - in the experimental group - 35%; in the control group – 33%), Critical Thinking (CT - in the experimental group - 50%; in the control group – 49%), and Empathy (EM - in the experimental group - 21%; in the control group – 20%). The lower ascending lines reflect Risk indices (RI) in both groups.

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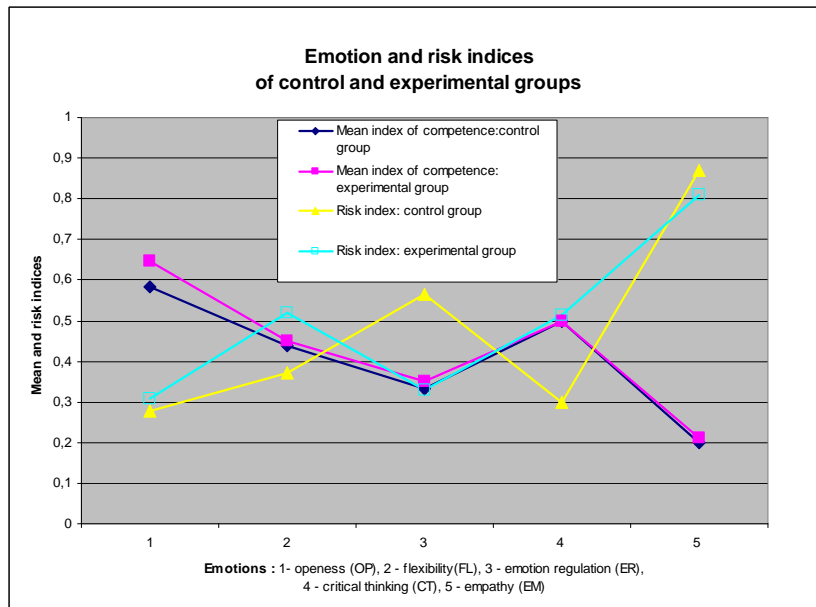
Figure 5. Factor Indices of Emotional Growth in the experimental and control groups.

As we can judge from the graphs, the figures reflecting Emotion Regulation, Flexibility, and Empathy are quite low. Risk indices for Empathy in both groups are very high, which reflects a wide dispersion of results in the groups and unreliability of the average scores (AS). Still, the analysis of the results has revealed that a high level of RI in the experimental group indicates that within the group, there appeared a subgroup of students, whose empathetic competence has started moving from the dead point to the positive direction. At the same time, a high level of RI in the control group reflects a wide dispersion of results.

In general, the obtained data - is an alarming signal, which demands a critical analysis of the adequacy of the academic process to the demands of the contemporary European society. However, our strongest findings for Openness and Critical Thinking do not argue against the importance of Emotion Regulation, Flexibility, and Empathy. On the contrary, these skills make sense in understanding successful outcomes of intercultural adjustment and suggest optimistic perspective in emotional potential development of students, provided a more personality-directed approach and emotion-related methodologies are implemented.

Thinking out of the box and analyzing rival opinions is impossible without Openness. Adaptation of new cognitive structures in the mind cannot occur without Openness and Flexibility.

Despite the overall indices being disturbing, our most rewarding resultant outcome of the experiment was the fact that our international students this time were more successful in building relationships with the local peers and teachers. They had greater subjective well-being in their adjustment and adaptation, higher academic performance, as well as, higher life satisfaction during their studies at ISMA and their sojourn in Latvia.

All international students decided to stay for the second term at ISMA and those who were enrolled in the university only for one term, applied to their home university authorities to prolong their stay at ISMA.

The research findings have proved that examining students' language proficiency related to the ability to recognize and control emotional reactions can provide a deeper insight into the effectiveness of the emotion-related educational process and its predictive future evidence for intercultural adjustment and adaptation, because emotion recognition and emotion regulation skills can be taught.

The systemic perspective has contributed to working out a systemic model of communicative language competence development that is systemic, from a person's conception to organization and management of the lifelong educational process, and is integral, that is, it develops and integrates cognitive, language, emotional and sociocultural competences.

This research is not attempting to solve the problem. The intent is to highlight the possibilities available through systemic, integral language education to shape up and manage the communicative competence development in order to contribute to the linguistic unity in Europe and to putting a bridge between positive inter-human communication, successful adjustment and adaptation, as well as to stimulate active citizenship and lifelong learning.

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