

# International Service Learning Assisting Foreigners in Learning Croatian

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*Abstract:* - This paper presents the conceptual framework for connecting interactive multimedia project AFILC (Assisting Foreigners in Learning Croatian) with the international service learning experience. Our main objective was to develop the system that will help international students at University of Zagreb to acquire the basics of Croatian language in a dynamic and interesting way, free of charge. Our second goal was to motivate foreign students to deeply experience another language and culture and to understand local customs by taking part in an international service learning course. Finally, our aim was to lay the foundations for structuring effective international service learning projects that will give foreign students insight into the relevance of their international and service experiences to their personal, career, educational and civic goals. At the same time, local students will get the opportunity to broaden the perspectives of their studies and to compare or contrast Croatian and international perspectives on the content of their study and civic education issues.

*Key-Words:* - International Service Learning (ISL), Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Croatian Language

## 1 Introduction

International Service Learning (ISL) can be conceptualized as the intersection of three different educational domains: service learning, study abroad and international education [3]. It has the potential to improve students' academic attainment, contribute to their personal growth, and develop global civic outcomes while students immerse themselves in a culture other than their own.

Apart from studying abroad, students participate in organized service activities that complement and augment their classroom learning, contribute to the community in the host country, support face-to-face interaction with others, increase cross-cultural understanding and challenge students to clarify and reconsider their role as citizens. Studies show that students currently choose international service learning experiences over study abroad experiences at an increasing rate [9]. They also show that students hope to be more connected with the host country and believe that serving within the community is a direct way to be involved [2].

This paper presents the conceptual framework for connecting AFILC project (*Assisting Foreigners in Learning Croatian*) [14] with the international service learning experience.

AFILC is the interactive multimedia learning system designed for foreigners who want to learn the Croatian language and find out some interesting cultural, historical and contemporary facts about Croatia and the Croatian people free of charge.

Our first goal is to help all students participating in a formal exchange programs between their home university and the University of Zagreb to master the basics of Croatian language using AFILC system to be able to live and study in the new environment.

Our second goal is to motivate these students to enroll in our international service learning course in order to deeply experience our language and culture and to get insight into the relevance of their international and service experiences to their personal, career, educational and civic goals.

## 2 Motivation and Background

AFILC system is primarily aimed at foreigners who want to learn the Croatian language. It is also aimed at the Croatian emigrants who want to learn their mother tongue. According to the census of 2001, the number of Croatian emigrants was 4,437,460 and only 25% of them can speak and/or understand Croatian language. We therefore believe that this system could help the majority of emigrants to learn the basics of the Croatian language, as well as preserve their roots and foster the tradition, language and culture of the country they originate from.

Furthermore, according to the census of 2001, there were 17,902 foreign citizens living in Croatia (the largest number of them living in Zagreb - 3,557 residents). The AFILC can help them to adapt and fit into the local community at their own pace.

Finally, with its connections with more than 100 institutions of higher education throughout Europe and other continents, each year the University of Zagreb welcomes an increasing number of international students into its academic community. In the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb alone there were 106 foreign students in the academic year 2011-2012, according to the statistics of the International Relations Service of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. The Office of International Cooperation of the University of Zagreb reported 160 students in the winter semester of the same academic year, while 130 students plan to study in our University during the summer semester.

Students participating in a formal exchange programs between their home university and the University of Zagreb (Erasmus, Bilateral agreements, CEEPUS, etc) usually found themselves having to take courses in Croatian, since the number of courses taught in English is still insufficient in our university.

They can learn Croatian throughout the academic year in the Centre for Croatian as Foreign and Second Language (CROATICUM) or during summer and winter vacations in the University School of Croatian Language and Culture, but the problem is that incoming exchange students usually need to learn basic Croatian in advance and have sufficient Croatian language skills to be successful in their exchange program of study that usually lasts between 5 and 10 months.

Therefore, the University of Zagreb, the Croatian Heritage Foundation & the University Computing Centre already offered an e-learning course of the Croatian language at the beginner level for

exchange students to learn Croatian in advance at the cost of 500 euros.

Although the price is not high, in times when all budgets are tightening, we believe that exchange students simply need a course that could be completed at their own pace for free.

Most of these students never had contact with the Croatian language before. Therefore, AFILC system can provide them with the basics of the Croatian language and basic facts about Croatian culture, people and the country they are staying in. Moreover, the AFILC could facilitate their communication with the administration, professors and other students on a daily basis.

Regarding the international service learning component of the framework, exchange students will be able to take part in the service learning course with local students (taught both in Croatian and English) and apply what they learned during their study at home and study abroad to “the real world“, being part of the project that provides service to the local Croatian community.

## 3 Conceptual Framework Description

The conceptual framework integrates the foreign language learning with the international service learning experience through AFILC system and service learning course framework. This section will describe in detail both parts of the framework.

### 3.1 Design of the System Assisting Foreigners in Learning Croatian

The first phase of the conceptual framework presents the AFILC system that enables information technology literate students to master the basics of the Croatian language quickly and efficiently using well-designed multimedia activities.

AFILC has interactive interface, focusing on the language use rather than the language analysis.

All learning materials are based on everyday communication in Croatian, but also consist of carefully selected texts about Croatian history, literature, poetry, art and tradition as well as contemporary issues.

We use authentic text documents in order to reach two basic goals. Firstly, we want to give examples of a basic everyday communication, and secondly, we want to introduce contemporary themes concerning Croatia to foreigners in order for them to get better acquainted with Croatian culture.

Additionally, facts about some of the most famous Croats that are recognized all over the globe, for

example Eduard Slavoljub Penkala, Janica Kostelić, etc. are included.

Finally, the content includes articles intended for the young group of learners, age 19-35, (music genre, trends, fashion, etc.), phrases for getting around the city and concepts from general Croatian culture (sports, film, art, nature and cultural heritage).

The basic language that guides the user through the content is English. Based on presented words and phrases, we provide an explanation on discrepancy between nouns, verbs, adjectives, numbers (1-10) and pronouns (personal and possessive). The last two sections apply on learning the three most common verb forms (simple present tense, simple past tense and simple future tense), and two cases with their corresponding declensions, i.e. noun inflections (nominative and accusative case). We put emphasis on exercises and interactivity, because we believe this kind of approach is most appropriate for computer assisted language learning (CALL). Auditory based exercises are designed in the form of dictates. At the end, a user gets the correct answer, i.e. properly written text, and an insight into mistakes. Vocabulary exercises include graphical material where the user has to recognize what the image shows, for example, exercise of identifying and writing words.

While using the AFILC, users are able to hear the pronunciation of certain words, phrases or even complete sentences in the Croatian language. They are provided with examples of useful phrases for getting around in space and time so that they can master some basics of everyday communication. The application includes a dictionary in which every word contains a textual explanation both in English and in Croatian. The pronunciation is in Croatian only.

The AFILC covers orthographic learning, so that users learn how to write words and orthoepic learning in order to hear the correct pronunciation of a given word. Each example is followed by a pronunciation of the word in the whole sentence. The system supports pronunciation of both incorrect and correct answers. This option enables the user to hear the difference between correct and incorrect answers. Verb pronunciation is accompanied by a video clip presenting the action of the verb. The user has to recognize what action is presented and provide the correct verb form in simple present, simple past and simple future tense.

The AFILC project is based on several multimedia principles. The learning content is presented to users in a dynamic way that includes picture, pronunciation, video, interactive activities and animation in order to make the language learning

process more efficient and easier than it is in the traditional classroom environment [12]. We also tend to increase and sustain the user's motivation by dynamic games and exercises. The animation is used moderately, since the excessive use of animation can be a distraction for users and change their focus [1]. The audio materials are clear and comprehensible, with the pleasant and calming narrator's voice making emphasis on the parts that are important. Finally, our system has balanced relationship between image, sound and text.

The AFILC system uses controlled interactivity that enables user to individually navigate through the content. The navigation bar allows user to control the displayed content and navigate from one unit to another in a simple and easy way.

Knowledge testing is conducted in a form of a quiz and users are able to work with the exercises at their own pace with the possibility of self-evaluation after solving the exercises.

Finally, the AFILC system will be soon available online and free of charge, so that each user has the opportunity to access and manage all the learning materials.

Although AFILC is a standalone application, it will be recommended for all foreign students who use it to enroll in the international service learning course mentioned in the previous sections. Students will be able to participate in communication with the native speakers and spend time reading, writing and practicing the Croatian language by fulfilling course assignments.

### **3.2 International Service Learning Course Design**

Our international service learning course will offer foreign students an ideal setting for a service learning experience, exposing them to a new environment through which they will be able learn about future job placement challenges and opportunities.

Foreign students with no knowledge of Croatian language will have to satisfy the following prerequisite prior to taking the course: master the basics of Croatian through AFILC system.

We perceive the knowledge possessed by foreign students as an asset that can be leveraged into community service for social change. International students may play many roles in this course including identifying potential community partners, recruiting their Croatian peers, designing projects, leading reflection activities and making group presentations in both Croatian and English language. But, above all they will be encouraged to

participate in the service learning projects they are most familiar with and will be provided with the opportunity to speak about their exchange experiences in group settings.

The course will consist of three phases. In the first (preparation) phase, foreign students will form a team with their Croatian peers and choose the team leader.

They will identify and analyze the problem or community need to be addressed together with their course instructor (who is one of the authors of this paper). Furthermore, they will plan the service learning project with the Croatian community partners.

Regarding the action phase, they will be partnered with community-based organizations of their own choice and conduct the planned project focusing on group collaboration, collective problem solving and learning of shared experience. In the last phase we will use the reflection activities to facilitate ongoing consideration of the experience, encourage broader appreciation of the SL projects and enhance sense of civic responsibility in both foreign students and their Croatian peers.

Students will be introduced with different reflection e-activities (e-journals, e-portfolios, e-discussions, etc.) that will be assessed at the end of the course. Regarding the assessment part, in the beginning of the semester students will also have to write the group project application in both Croatian and English (objectives, target group, type of project, etc.), while at the end of the semester they will be asked to submit the group project report (also in Croatian and English language). They will work over the course of the semester (3 hours per week over a period of 15 weeks) on the SL project that is directly related to the community need. Since the current exchange programs of study last between 5 and 10 months, the period of 15 weeks is optimal for foreign students to spend on the SL project in consultation with the academic course instructor and the chosen community partner, applying the theoretical knowledge and acquiring new skills required for activities that they selected due to their interests.

All students who will take part in this service learning course will use email, discussion boards, content management system (Moodle), online journals and Word processor collaboration features for sharing, collecting and organizing their work, as well as their reflection. They will earn 5 ECTS credits for participation in this course.

Finally, they will all engage in intentionally designed, implemented and assessed activities that provide educationally meaningful opportunities for

students to interact with, learn from and contribute to the community partner.

### 3.3 Expected Results

Our international service learning course aims to expand foreign students' cultural and social viewpoints, to improve their foreign language proficiency and to prepare them for increasingly challenging e-linked work environment with diverse participants and modes of engagement, while they engage in discussions and collaboration on a hands-on project with Croatian peers.

It also aims to emphasize collaborative efforts, so that Croatian students (who are not used to teamwork, often work individually and dislike collaboration) also get a chance to learn invaluable lessons about work in multicultural groups while participating in arbitrarily assigned groups. They will learn how to get along with all group members, to deal with free riders, to schedule group meetings and to handle all difficulties of group work.

Furthermore, we expect both Croatian and foreign students to learn how to identify the main objectives and issues of their service learning project, to structure and outline their project and to use graphs, charts, tables and other quantitative representations in their project as well as e-portfolio in both Croatian and English language. International students will also learn to write the project draft and handle the documentation in Croatian and they will be asked to write weekly journal submissions, as well as multiple drafts of their final projects in both Croatian and English language.

Foreign students will also have the opportunity to speak Croatian formally in class, to participate in a class debate, to learn to speak better and to present their ideas well. Both foreign students and their Croatian peers will learn to use cloud-based presentation software and zooming presentation editors to present data and design a compelling presentation.

Finally, the globalization of the economy has significantly transformed the today's workplace so both Croatian students and foreign students need to be able to work comfortably with people different from themselves, people of both genders, all races and ethnicities.

Both groups of students will get a chance to step out of the homogeneous group and get experiences outside this safe clique and further develop their diversity skills.

## 4 Discussion

This section aims to explore the benefits and challenges of the above described content framework.

The benefit for foreign students (learning Croatian language and further developing their project management skills), teaching faculty members (learning how to design service learning bilingual course) and community partner (gaining international insight into their issues and perspective on possible solutions from foreign students) are obvious.

In addition to being able to enhance their learning of Croatian language, international students will get the opportunity to apply knowledge in an international setting, enhance their critical thinking, cross-cultural communication, personal development, motivation for civic involvement, a sense of self-efficacy and their civic development. They will have the means to practice citizenship skills through service activities to the local community partner, to experience another language and culture deeply and to understand local customs. International students will also engage in structured reflection activities through which they will get insight into the relevance of their international and service experiences to their personal, career, educational and civic goals.

Apart from that, such experience will provide both Croatian and foreign students with opportunities for additional learning goals, activities, and relationships that are not available in a domestic service learning course or in a traditional study abroad course.

Furthermore, the service experience will provide an added dimension to the study abroad experience of the foreign students. They will get the opportunity to wrestle with complex issues in the foreign (Croatian) community, to collaborate with their Croatian peers in joint action, to become a part of the solution and directly translate civic and foreign language skills to the professional life. They will get the opportunity to develop cross-cultural competence, cross-cultural communication skills and empathy, even if they never interacted with their community in domestic service learning.

On the other hand, the international component will broaden perspectives of the Croatian students enrolled in this course by providing them with opportunities to compare and contrast domestic and international perspectives on the content of their service learning project and their studies. This course will also help Croatian students to develop the intercultural competence and cultural sensitivity, overcome the stereotypes and prejudices related to

other communities and obtain deeper and more applied understanding of cultural differences.

Regarding the benefits to community partners, foreign students will bring them their special skills and experiences, as well as international expertise. Teaching faculty members will be able to take on new roles, enhance their teaching in the foreign language as they actively mentor international students and build international connections.

Apart from faculty benefit, international service learning projects would position University of Zagreb as service branded, increase its credibility and significance to both the local and international community.

Empirical studies [4, 7, 11, 13, 15] have found that participation in international service learning increases students' intercultural competence, language skills, appreciation of cultural difference, appreciation for diversity, and experiential understanding of complex global problems related to their study.

Finally, the results of the current research on international service learning show positive effects on the sense of justice [10] civic attitudes [6] and transformational learning [8].

But, in order to conduct a valid and comprehensive evaluation of our course that will take place in a cultural context other than the foreign student's own, we will need to perform the intercultural research, research on acculturation and cultural competence.

## 5 Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to present the conceptual framework for connecting interactive multimedia project AFILC (Assisting Foreigners in Learning Croatian) with the international service learning experience. Apart from developing the system that could help international students at University of Zagreb to acquire the basics of Croatian language, we intended to motivate foreign students to deeply experience our language and culture and to understand local customs by taking part in an international service learning course.

Communities in which businesses are located today are international, diverse and sometimes virtual. All our local and international students need to see themselves as a part of a larger, social entity in the global work environment linked by the thread of the Internet.

Through our international service learning course all students will apply the core concepts of service learning [5] (reciprocity, service to a community,

knowledge acquisition and reflection) to an international context.

This framework might give foreign students insight into the relevance of their international and service experiences to their personal, career, educational and civic goals. At the same time, local students will get the opportunity to broaden the perspectives of their studies and to compare Croatian and international perspectives on the content of their study and civic education issues.

Finally, these international service learning projects will reflect complex issues of student's future workplaces, while meeting the needs of multiple participants from multiple communities, giving them the ability to make connections across the disciplines.

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