



LLU STUDENTS' INTEREST IN AND AWARENESS OF FRANCE: ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

LLU STUDENTU INTERESE UN INFORMĒTĪBA PAR FRANCIJU: PĒTĪJUMA REZULTĀTU ANALĪZE

Sanita Grasmane, BSc. Public Management, e-pasts: sanita.grasmane@apollo.lv

Daina Grasmane, Dr. paed., e-pasts: daina.grasmane@apollo.lv

Abstract

Interaction across cultures helps co-create a new European community and maintain social harmony in it. Owing to the fact that Latvia is a member state of the EU, it is of great significance for us to integrate in the common "European Village." Awareness and understanding of our neighbouring countries as well as the superpowers of the EU, such as France, Germany and Great Britain, can contribute to the process of faster integration.

Therefore, the aim of this research study was to clarify the LLU students' interest in the diverse fields of France, to assess the availability of information provided to them through different channels, as well as the quality of the available information, which could broaden students' horizons and foster their understanding of the French culture. In the empirical study 191 respondents from seven faculties of the LLU were involved. The main findings testified to the following: The majority of the respondents took a very high interest in France; their main interest focused on French architecture, fashion, cinematography, music, culinary and education. The differences in the opinions of the respondents were faculty related. The interest of the majority of the respondents' was predominantly focused on broadening their horizons, however, in the case of the Civil Engineering Faculty, to the future professional career of the students. A considerable percentage of the respondents were not satisfied with the limited availability of useful information on France.

The main conclusions of the study suggested that the contribution of the academic staff should be enhanced, and more native speakers should also be involved in the academic and social activities at the university to enhance the awareness of France and its culture. It was recommended to examine and recognize the close relationship between cultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity and intercultural effectiveness so that a better understanding of intercultural communication between Latvian and French young people can be achieved.

Key words: French culture, fields of interest, sources of information, availability of information, quality of information.

Introduction

The trends of European integration encourage people to integrate different cultural identities and to co-create a new European community. New forms of thought are required. People have to gain the requisite knowledge and skills that account for socio-cultural competence.

Nowadays, it is widely acknowledged that language proficiency alone is not adequate, communication is holistic, and it also requires knowledge of the ways cultures and languages interlock, and an understanding of how interaction across cultures operates to maintain social harmony. Therefore, intercultural competence should be developed, taking into account its multidimensional character "comprising the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects of human interaction" (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, 2009).

Awareness unites people and makes them understand and value diversity. Therefore, this research study highlights the interest taken by the students from the Latvian University of Agriculture about France and its culture, and how they would come to know it.

Methodology

The aim of this research study was to clarify the LLU students' interest in diverse fields of France, the assess the availability of information provided to them through different channels, as well as the quality of the available information, which could broaden students' horizons and foster their understanding of French culture. The following **hypothesis** was defined: The interest of the LLU students in French culture is great; however, the availability and quality of information are not high enough to meet their needs.

The theoretical framework of the study was based on the teachings by Byram (1997); Byram and Zarate (1994); Crawshaw and Tomic (2004); Hervey and Higgins (2002); Jordan; Kelly, Elliot, and Fant, (2001); Phipps, Gonzalez, (2004); Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, (2009).

The empirical study was conducted at the LLU. **191 respondents** from the following faculties participated in it: 50 students from Economics, 35 from Food Technology, 30 from Social Sciences, 25 from Technical Faculty, 19 from Civil Engineering, 18 from Forestry, and 14 from the Faculty of Agriculture. The respondents were from Year 1 and Year 2 of their studies. Their ages were between 18 and 20 years. The survey was conducted by means of a questionnaire developed by the authors of this study.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that the respondents expressed very high interest in France. The breakdown of their responses to the question “Are you interested in France?” was as follows: 49 % very positive; 37 % positive; 12% negative; and just 2% very negative responses were given. Thus, very positive responses prevailed (See Fig. 1.).

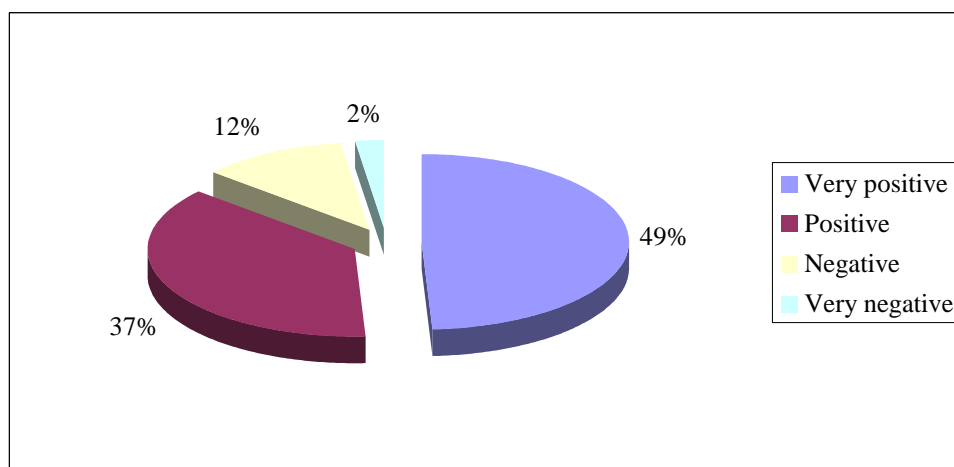


Fig. 1. Students' Interest in France, Breakdown of Responses

Source: Data obtained by the authors of this study

When looking at the breakdown of the responses by faculties (See Table 1), it was evident that all the respondents from the Faculty of Social Sciences took a very great interest in France, followed by the respondents from the Faculties of Food Technology, Civil Engineering and Economics.

Of all the respondents, the lowest level of interest in France was displayed by the respondents from the Faculties of Agriculture and Forestry. However, a conclusion could be drawn that, in general, **the LLU respondents had a surprisingly high interest in France.**

Table 1

**Students' Interest in France,
Breakdown of Responses by Faculties**

Faculty	1. Very positive		2. Positive		3. Negative		4. Very negative		RESPONDENTS	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Economics	18	36.0	22	44.0	9	18.0	1	2.0	50	100
Food Technology	20	57.1	14	40.0	1	2.9	0	0	35	100
Social Sciences	18	60.0	12	40.0	0	0	0	0	30	100
Technical	12	48.0	7	28.0	4	16.0	2	8.0	25	100
Civil Engineering	10	52.7	7	36.8	2	10.5	0	0	19	100
Agriculture	8	57.1	2	14.3	3	21.4	1	7.2	14	100
Forestry	7	42.2	7	36.8	4	21.0	0	0	18	100
Total	93	49.2	71	37.2	23	11.5	4	2.1	191	100

Source: Data obtained by the authors of this study

To clarify the students' **fields of interest related to France**, a question “*What fields related to France are you interested in?*” was asked. The respondents could underline several options, offered by the authors of this study, or suggest their own options. In total, **515 responses** were obtained from the above mentioned respondents.

When looking at the data, we could conclude that the main fields of the respondents' interest were related to the French culture (See Fig. 2). **Architecture, fashion industry, cinematography, music, and cuisine** were selected.

Architecture was valued by 102 out of the 191 respondents, fashion industry by 80, cinematography by 75, music by 65 respondents, cuisine by 49, history by 42, and education- by 41 respondents.

The data suggested that the respondents were least interested in French fiction, science, politics and philosophy. In our further research, it would be very interesting to look for the reasons of the above differences in opinions.

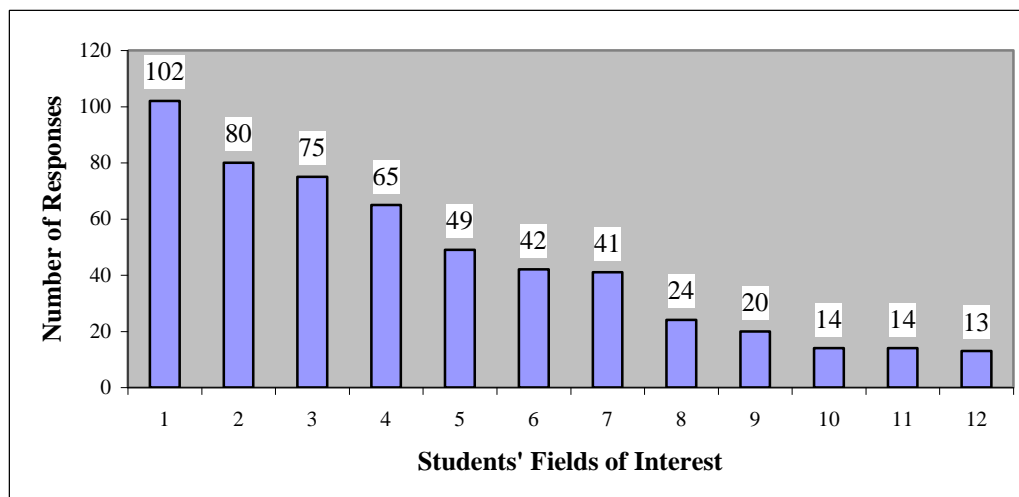


Fig. 2. Students' Fields of Interest Related to France, Breakdown of Responses

Source: Data obtained by the authors of this study

1. Arhitektūra- Architecture

2. Mode- Fashion

3. Kino- Cinematography

4. Mūzika- Music

5. Kulinārija- Cuisine

6. Vēsture- History

7. Izglītība- Education

8. Cita joma- Other Field

9. Daiļliteratūra- Fiction

10. Politika- Politics

11. Zinātne- Science

12. Filozofija- Philosophy

As testified by the research findings, the differences in the students' interest in French culture are faculty related (See Table 2).

For example, 15 respondents out of 30, from the Faculty of Social Sciences, mentioned their interest in architecture, 14 respondents valued French fashion, and 13 respondents music. Interest in education was indicated by almost one third of the respondents from that faculty.

The interest of the 50 respondents from the Faculty of Economics prevailed in the French cinematography (27 respondents), architecture (24 respondents), and music (20 respondents). The French fashion was also very popular with them.

Surprisingly, the majority of the respondents from the Faculty of Food Technology were mostly interested in architecture. We had expected a much larger interest in French cuisine. However, less than a half of the respondents admitted their interest in it.

The authors of this study were pleased to discover that not only a considerable number of the respondents from the Social Sciences Faculty took interest in French education, but also the respondents from other faculties did, except a couple of them, such as the Faculty of Agriculture and Technical Faculty. Due to the fact that Latvia is a member state of the EU, nowadays, it is very critical indeed to acquire the best international experiences of the leading EU countries, France, of course, being one of them.

The data obtained from the survey of the 19 respondents, who came from the Faculty of Civil Engineering, revealed that almost all of them were interested in French architecture (15 respondents). This fact could be explained by their professional needs.

Table 2

Students' Fields of Interest Related to France, Breakdown of Responses by Faculties

Faculty	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Economics, N = 50	9	5	20	24	10	11	7	27	0	1	19	8
Food Technology, N = 35	13	1	11	23	15	5	0	12	1	2	22	0
Social Sciences, N = 30	9	1	13	15	8	7	4	7	4	3	14	4
Technical, N = 25	4	2	5	12	7	6	2	6	2	1	8	3
Civil Engineering, N = 19	8	1	7	15	3	7	2	11	1	2	11	2
Agriculture, N = 14	1	1	5	8	4	4	2	6	1	0	3	2
Forestry, N = 18	6	3	4	5	2	2	3	6	5	4	3	6
Total, N = 191	50	14	65	102	16	42	20	75	14	13	80	25

Source: Data obtained by the authors of this study

Explanations: N = Number of respondents

Figures in red - the largest amount of responses

Figures in green - the second largest amount of responses

Figures in blue - the third largest amount of responses

Fields of Interest:

1. Education

2. Politics

3. Music

4. Architecture

5. Cuisine

6. History

7. Fiction

8. Cinematography

9. Science

10. Philosophy

11. Fashion Industry

12. Other Fields (sports, car industry, tourism etc.)

Table 3 presents 539 responses to the question "Which kinds of sources of information do you usually use to obtain information on France?"

Table 3

**Kinds of Sources of Information on France,
Breakdown of Responses by Faculties**

Faculty	1.		2.		3.		4.		5.		6.		7.		8.		9.	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Economics	31	22.8	42	30.8	3	2.2	14	10.3	1	0.73	18	13.2	11	8.1	11	8.1	5	3.8
Food Technology	18	20.0	28	31.1	0	0.0	19	21.1	4	4.4	15	16.6	1	1.1	3	3.3	2	2.2
Social Sciences	15	16.1	23	24.7	5	5.4	15	16.1	8	8.6	14	15.0	5	5.4	6	6.5	2	2.2
Technical	16	27.6	21	36.2	3	5.2	9	15.5	0	0.0	6	10.3	1	1.7	2	3.4	0	0.0
Civil Engineering	16	24.2	18	27.3	3	4.5	8	12.1	0	0.0	9	13.6	5	7.6	6	9.0	1	1.5
Agriculture	11	26.8	12	29.3	2	4.9	4	9.8	0	0.0	5	12.2	2	4.9	4	9.8	1	2.4
Forestry	16	29.0	19	34.5	2	3.6	3	5.5	0	0.0	8	14.5	2	3.6	4	7.3	1	1.5

Source: Data obtained by the authors of this study

Explanations: N = Number of respondents

Figures in red - the largest amount of responses

Figures in green - the second largest amount of responses

Figures in blue - the third largest amount of responses

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| 1. Press | 4. Friends or acquaintances | 7. Textbooks |
| 2. Television | 5. Academic staff | 8. Fiction |
| 3. Respondents' own travels | 6. Reference literature | 9. Other sources |

The summarized data (See above Table 3) indicated that **the most popular sources of information** by the respondents were television (163 responses or 31%), the press (123 responses or 23%), and reference literature (54 responses or 14%).

When analysing the **breakdown of these data by faculties**, it was obvious that television was **the most common source** of information on France used by all of them. Likewise, all of them, except the Faculty of Food Technology, also mentioned the press as **the second** most frequently used source of information.

Friends and acquaintances were also regarded as a very reliable source of information by respondents from several faculties. For example, the respondents from the Faculty of Social Sciences considered this source to be as important as the press.

Opinions about **the third** most frequently used source of information on France differed greatly among the represented faculties. For instance, the Faculties of Economics, Civil Engineering, Agriculture and Forestry mentioned reference literature; the Faculty of Food Technology the press; and the Technical Faculty friends and acquaintances. The research data testified that, regrettably, the academic staff did not serve as a significant source of information on France for the majority of the respondents.

The data included in Fig. 3 show that when responding to the question, "Is the available information on France sufficient for you?" 15% of the respondents gave *very positive* responses, and 41% *positive* responses. However, the percentage of the *negative* and *very negative* responses was also very high, and could be considered as a warning sign about the necessity to provide more extensive amounts of useful information about France.

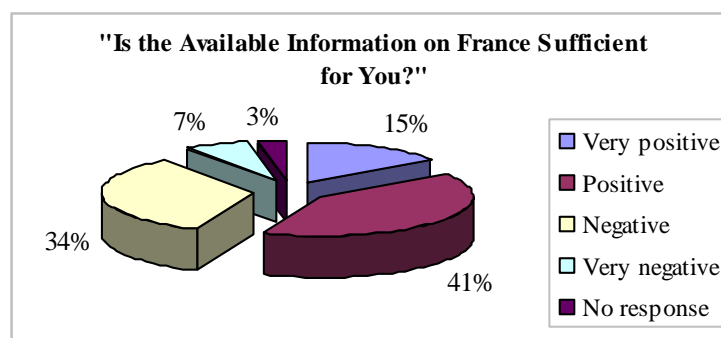


Fig. 3. Quantity of the Available Information

Source: Data obtained by the authors of this study

The breakdown of the responses by faculties is given in Table 4.

Table 4

Availability of Information, Breakdown of Responses by Faculties										
Faculty	1. Very Positive		2. Positive		3. Negative		4. Very Negative		5. No response	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Economics	10	20.0	17	34.0	19	38.0	4	8.0	0	0
Food Technology	4	11.4	15	44.8	12	34.2	3	8.5	1	2.8
Social Sciences	5	16.7	13	43.3	11	36.6	1	3.3	0	0
Technical	5	20.0	9	36.0	6	24.0	2	8.0	3	12.0
Civil Engineering	2	10.5	8	42.1	8	42.1	1	5.3	0	0
Agriculture	1	7.2	7	50.0	3	21.4	1	7.1	2	14.3
Forestry	2	11.1	9	50.0	6	33.3	1	5.5	0	0

Source: Data obtained by the authors of this study

The respondents from the Faculty of Forestry were the most satisfied with the amount of the available information on France, and they were followed by the Faculties of Social Sciences and Food Technology.

When assessing the quality of the available information, the majority of the respondents were satisfied with it - 19 % of the respondents gave very positive responses, and 40.0% - positive responses (See Fig.4). However, the percentage of the negative and very negative responses was rather high, and gave food for serious thought.

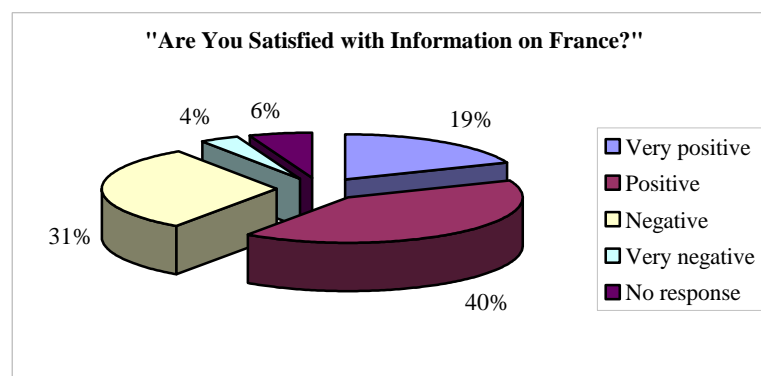


Fig. 4. Quality of Available Information, Breakdown of Responses

Source: Data obtained by the authors of this study

When looking at the breakdown of the responses by the faculties (Table 5), it could be seen that the highest evaluation of the quality of information was given by the Faculty of Social Sciences (16.7% very positive and 53.3% positive responses), then came the Technical Faculty (36.0% very positive and 28.0% positive responses). The respondents from the Faculty of Civil Engineering were least satisfied with the quality of the available information on France: 42.1% negative and 5.3% very negative responses were given. It was interesting to note that there existed a correlation between this indicator and that of availability of information. The respondents from the Faculty of Civil Engineering had given the highest number of negative responses when assessing the availability of information on France. Furthermore, the most frequently used sources of information by them were TV, the press and reference literature, but no academic staff at all. If we go back to the question aimed at identifying their fields of interest, we can see that the students from the Faculty of Civil Engineering were interested, particularly, in French architecture, cinematography and education. These data suggest that during the study process at university, a closer attention should be paid to the areas the students are interested in to enhance their professional development and broadening horizons.

Table 5

Quality of Information on France, Breakdown of Responses by Faculties										
Faculty	1. Very Positive		2. Positive		3. Negative		4. Very Negative		5. No Response	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Economics	8	16.0	20	40.0	14	28.0	1	2.0	7	14
Food Technology	6	17.1	14	40.0	12	34.3	1	2.8	2	5.7
Social Sciences	5	16.7	16	53.3	7	23.3	1	3.3	1	3.3
Technical	9	36.0	7	28.0	6	24.0	2	8.0	1	4.0
Civil Engineering	3	15.8	7	36.8	8	42.1	1	5.3	0	0.0
Agriculture	2	14.3	5	35.7	5	35.7	0	0.0	2	14.3
Forestry	2	11.1	9	50.0	7	33.3	1	5.6	0	0.0

Source: Data obtained by the authors of this study

When analyzing the **376 responses** aimed at identifying the best activities for providing information on diverse fields of interest related to France, a wide range of opinions were obtained (See Table 6). For example, 28.7 % of the responses given by the students from the Faculty of Economics revealed that particular **TV broadcasts** would be preferred by them, and 17.8% of the respondents agreed that **French visiting lecturers should be invited** to the university. Quite a significant number of the responses (13.9%) revealed the students' opinions that French films should be screened in the cinema, and a branch of the French Cultural Centre could be established in Yelgava. The respondents from the Faculty of Food Technology held similar opinions as well.

A strong support for the proposal to invite French visiting lecturers was also given by the respondents from the Faculty of Social Sciences (27.4% of the responses). Their opinions about the role of TV for informing people about France was similar to those of the respondents from the Faculties of Economics and Food Technology, and amounted to 24.7% of the responses. Support was also expressed for the suggestion to publish articles in the students' mass media (12.3%), and 10.9% of the respondents suggested to open a French Cultural Centre in Yelgava.

Thus, a conclusion could be drawn that, although different opinions among the respondents existed in terms of the best sources of providing information on France, preferences were given to particular TV broadcasts, French guest lectures and French films to be shown in the cinema.

Table 6

**Suggestions How to Provide Information on France,
Breakdown of Responses**

Faculty	1.		2.		3.		4.		5.		6.		7.	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Economics	29	28.7	14	13.9	14	13.9	18	17.8	11	10.9	8	7.9	2	1.9
Food Technology	17	29.8	9	15.8	8	14.0	12	21.0	3	5.3	7	12.3	1	1.8
Social Sciences	18	24.7	6	8.2	8	10.9	20	27.4	7	9.6	9	12.3	1	1.4
Technical	9	21.9	5	12.2	4	9.8	6	14.6	9	21.9	5	12.2	1	2.4
Civil Engineering	12	26.0	6	13.0	3	6.5	11	25.9	4	8.6	5	10.9	4	8.6
Agriculture	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Forestry	17	30.4	4	7.1	4	7.1	9	16.0	11	19.6	3	5.4	4	7.1

Source: Data obtained by the authors of this study

1. To demonstrate specific broadcasts on France on the national TV
2. To demonstrate French films in the cinema
- 3 To establish a branch of French Cultural Centre in Yelgava
4. To invite French visiting lecturers
5. To publish articles on French culture in the national mass media
6. To publish articles in the students' media
7. To produce specific radio broadcasts on France

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. The prevailing majority of the students of the Latvian University of Agriculture take a great interest in France and its culture. Preferences were given to architecture, fashion, cinematography, music, culinary, and education. The differences in opinions of the respondents could be explained by the students' specific professional needs, their intellectual development, and individual needs.
2. To obtain reliable and high quality information on France, various sources are used by the students. Mass media and reference literature are the most popular ones. Regretfully, the contribution by the academic staff of the university is not sufficient.
3. A very high percentage of the respondents held a view that the available information was not sufficient for them. Also, a considerable number of the respondents were not fully satisfied with the quality of the available information. The research findings suggested that their awareness of the French culture should be extended.
4. Owing to the fruitful activities conducted by the French Cultural Centre of the French Embassy, cultural relations between the LLU students and French native speakers have been expanding. Therefore, to promote further the development of cross-cultural skills of our students, an intercultural communication course could be designed and introduced in the French language curriculum at the LLU.
5. It is also recommended to examine and recognize the close relationship between intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity and intercultural effectiveness so that a better understanding of intercultural communication between Latvian and French young people can be achieved.
6. Further research is needed to explore the ways to develop effective training at intercultural competence and increase students' awareness of French culture.

Bibliography

1. Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
2. Byram, M. and Zarate, G. (1994). *Definitions, Objectives and Assessment of Socio-cultural Competence*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
3. Crawshaw, R. and Tomic, A. (2004). *The Intercultural Narrative*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
4. Hervey, S. and Higgins, I. (2002). *Thinking French Translation*. London: Routledge.
5. Jordan, Sh. "Intercultural issues in foreign language learning and ethnographic approaches to study abroad." Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics, and Area Studies. Retrieved from the Internet: <http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/100> on 14, June 2010.
6. Kelly, M., Elliot, I., and Fant, L. (2001). *Third Level, Third Space: Intercultural Communication and Language in European Higher Education*. Bern: Peter Lang.
7. McBride, N. and Seago, K. (2001). *Intercultural Learning in the Modern Languages Curriculum*. London: CILT/AFLS.
8. Phipps, A., and Gonzalez, M. (2004). *Modern Languages: Learning and Teaching in an Intercultural Field*. London: Sage.
9. Samovar, L. A., Porter, R. E., and McDaniel, E. R. (2009). *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*. Twelfth Edition. Wadsworth: CENGAGE Learning.