

Using Websites to Promote Intercultural Competence – Case Study with Albanian Students Practicing Listening Skills

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Abstract

Are virtual environments conducive to the promotion of intercultural competence among foreign language students? The present study seeks to give a substantiated answer to this question by presenting and analyzing the results of a project carried out with the first year students of English language in the University of Korça, Albania. The project involves the employment of a dedicated class website as a tool and medium in the teaching of listening skills with a view to determining its impact in the development of the students' intercultural competence. An analysis of how the different intercultural components are realized within the framework of the class website serves to throw light on the above-stated query. Methodologically speaking, the results of our study follow from applying the critical tool of discourse analysis to the listening texts themselves and to the comments the students have posted on our website forum. The detailed examination of linguistic and stylistic features together with that of other elements that belong to the content of the text leads to the conclusion that the use of websites in SLT (Second Language Teaching) serves the students to improve their intercultural knowledge, attitudes, values and skills.

Keywords: *intercultural competence, website, second language, discourse analysis*

1. Introduction

There is strong agreement on the fact that the Internet represents a metaphor for a place or environment that has social significance in identity building processes (Turkle, 1996), as well as being a cultural environment promoting virtual citizenship and virtual communities (Rheingold, 1993).

In the context of a multicultural Europe, where the winds of globalization are affecting people from different cultural backgrounds and civilizations, the need for mutual understanding has become very pressing. The role to be played by visionary teachers who make use of the latest pedagogical tools in order to help their students meet the challenges of the contemporary world is a crucial one. As the experience of teachers around the world has amply demonstrated the development of the students' intercultural competence – one of the chief aims that guides the SLT – is greatly enhanced when the teaching/learning process is conducted along new paths made possible by the employment of digital technology. It is our firm belief that such an experience should be more widely known and practiced by foreign language teachers in their day-to-day exertions with students.

It has not been a long time since the concept of intercultural competence first made its way into the vast corpus of academic literature on teaching aims and methodologies. Yet, its very pertinence to the problems which the modern world faces has given this concept a very contemporary ring and placed it in the foreground of the theory and practice of SLT. Though at first sight rather vague and abstract, the idea of intercultural competence is firmly based on such fundamental values as the inherent dignity of the individual human being despite his cultural affiliations or provenance and the essential equality of rights between various cultures as the groundwork on which a decent and democratic global society can be built.

2. Case study – Participants and Demographical Context

There have been few empirical studies of the intercultural dimension in SLT, while the relationship between virtual teaching environments and the enhanced acquisition of intercultural competences has received little direct investigation. As for the Albanian context, the present situation could be described as one of increasing (if somewhat spontaneous) practical interest in the new ICT-based technologies among foreign language students and teachers. Our project, which involved the creation of a website called "English for the Net Generation", was conceived as a means of understanding

these novel methodological trends by providing a multitude of facts on which to base our conclusions. The participants, 12 in all, were chosen among the first-year students of English at "Fan Noli" University, Korca.

3. Aim of the Study

The central aim of this study is to determine whether the employment of virtual environments in SLT is conducive to the promotion of the students' intercultural competence. This will be decided after a careful analysis of the level to which the different intercultural components are realized within the framework of web-based English listening classes – the discourse analysis of listening materials, interpretation of learning activities, and comments posted on the website forum. More concretely, the question that guides our critical investigation is:

How are the different components of the intercultural dimension realized in:

- a. the listening materials online?
- b. the accomplishment of the various tasks and the comments posted on the web page?

4. Research Methods

The results presented in this study are based on a critical discourse analysis involving a minute examination of linguistic and stylistic features of the listening materials from www.bbc.co.uk, www.voanews.com, www.esl-lab.com, etc, the various online discussions and the students' comments posted in the forum of our website www.netenglisholsa.org. These results provide an overwhelming amount of evidence on the degree to which intercultural elements form an integral part of a virtual teaching environment; they also serve to verify the thesis that websites serve as catalysts in the promotion of the students' intercultural competence through the teaching of a foreign language.

5. Analysis of the Results

5.1 Critical discourse analysis of the listening texts in our website

One of the main objectives of our online listening practice, besides the self-evident aim of promoting the students' listening skills, was to broaden their cultural horizon by presenting them with a diversity of perspectives and values representative of the culture and civilization of the English-speaking countries – the guiding educational ideal of such an approach being their mental emancipation for all forms of prejudiced narrow-mindedness or thinking under the pernicious influence of conscious and semiconscious stereotypes.

The degree to which this objective has been achieved will be shown by the following examination whereby both the contents and the form of the listening materials posted online are submitted to the critical tool of discourse analysis.

Firstly, the sources from which our listening materials have been downloaded are both institutional and of a recognized global impact – the web pages of BBC and the VOA are renowned for their professional authoritativeness and for championing the cause of human rights and liberty around the world. The teaching websites which we have used as sources for the listening materials are also very authoritative and quite popular with students of English as a foreign language. The texts chosen from these sources were of many types and forms: radio interviews with film stars, reports and analyses of the latest news from around the world (Croatia's admission into the EU, the anti-government protests in Turkey, the controversy on the abortion law in Ireland); highlights from history or topical discussions on social, cultural and even medical questions. The lively dialogues and heated debates, the real-life stories of ordinary people which are presented with a didactic purpose in the teaching websites, the academic discussion of diverse topics (the lecture on the idea of freedom or on the frozen continent of Antarctica) have all opened up a wide and variegated cultural prospect before the eyes and minds of Albanian students. All these topics and issues acquire a heightened immediacy and depth as they are presented through a medium which is both strikingly stimulating for the senses and allows all the requisite time for thoughtful reflection. The students, thus, become familiar not only with dry facts and information about English-speaking countries but also with the inner texture of life in them. They learn to see things from the viewpoints of the various social groups and individuals that come to life in the listening materials. The content and the form of these materials reveal what various contacts and experiences have in common and what gives them a unique value and significance. By way of illustration we can mention the very touching problem of Enrique Ramirez, as it is described in *Enrique's Story*. Through this video the students become aware of the implications of illiteracy as a major individual and

social problem. By learning about the way that this challenge is met in the American society the students find it easier to look at the same problem in their own country through an enlarged perspective that makes for deeper understanding of the issues involved. The video describes an illiterate man's obstacles in fulfilling his duty as a parent and the strength of will backed up by organized social support which enable him to overcome them and among other things learn to read his son a bedtime story. By adopting a comparative approach the students get to think about such questions as: is this experience relevant to our Albanian society? Does our society treat illiteracy with the same organized efforts as is shown by the American example?

Secondly, an important aspect of discourse prominent in many listening texts is the adoption of more than one perspective in the discussion of a particular topic (Atay, Kurt, Çamlıbel, Ersin & Kaslioglu, 2009). A typical example is the coverage of the controversy on the adoption of the abortion law by the Irish, which divided public opinion into two opposing camps. (See Listening Class 12: "News Report - Abortion Law Vote Polarizes Ireland"). Similarly, the reports on the protests in Turkey by the BBC and the VOA express a variety of opinions and viewpoints as the reporters themselves, the protesters, the representatives of the Turkish government and other politicians from around the world comment on the daily rallies and the violent reaction by the police. Getting to view things from a multitude of perspectives helps students to develop a critical intercultural consciousness.

Thirdly, the presence of the intercultural dimension in the listening materials is demonstrated by the frequent use of words and expressions (general nouns, proper nouns, etc.) with positive intercultural connotation (they point to such values as the acceptance of people regardless of race, nationality, etc) and the absence of pejorative expressions or offensive stereotypes. The following is an extensive presentation of concrete examples from the different listening materials:

"My Autism and Me": a different point of view, accepted, understanding, support, relate, socialize, unique, special, etc.
"Liberty": free(dom), reaching out other minds, human exchange, human contact, basic need, democracy, sharing thoughts, hope, a hungarian woman, future, human rights, individuals, citizens, liberty, harmony, no frontiers of space or time, Russian, English, Burmese, Tunisian, Middle East, respect, 'common to all races', dignity, similarities, dissimilarities, prejudice, oppression, women and men, universal human aspiration, nation, human communication, to engage.
"Protests in Turkey": peace, women's rights, listen, respect, citizens' rights, undermine their rights, democracy, 'people's voice will be heard'.
"Abortion Law Vote Polarizes Ireland": woman, support, solidarity, woman power, ethnic, right to decide, "Woman Power Connect" (an Indian association)
"VIP News": openness, self-awareness, responsibility, stigmatized, make a choice, power.
"News Report": European Union, Croatian heritage, Croatian flag, freedom of movement, peace, citizens of my country.
"Enrique's Story": self-esteem, together, a chance for life, patience.
Proper nouns naming places: the USA, Croatia, Dubrovnik, European Union, Yugoslavia, Serbia, Turkey, Istanbul, Paris, Ireland, India, Burma, Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, the Soviet Union, the Great Britain.
Proper nouns naming protagonist characters in the extracts: Enrique Ramirez, Rosie, Ben, Lennie, Nadan Vidosevic, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Zlatica Hoke, Jennifer Psaki (spokesperson of US Department of State), Ozan Kecili, Caroline Simons, Declan Meena, Mark Hennesy, Ranjana Kumari, Aung San Suu Kyi, Angeline Jolie, Margaret Thatcher, Boris Kaliegin, etj.

This gallery of characters from different countries and backgrounds all use the English language as the medium of reaching out for an international audience – a significant fact on the status and value of English in the contemporary world. By being exposed to the actual thoughts and feelings of people from all classes of society and religious or cultural affiliations (Hollywood stars, politicians, scientists, representatives of various subcultures and denominations, etc.) the students gradually become more open-minded in their outlook and more empathetic in their sensibilities.

Fourthly, a further intercultural element disclosed by discourse analysis is the presence of linguistic implication. Events, people, and attitudes are frequently presented through the language of tropes (metaphors, similes, etc) and other devices, which, by avoiding the bluntness and crudity characteristic of the uncritical use of language, make for thoughtfulness and a generous spirit of acceptance in evaluating others. On the other hand, the use of literary tropes and indirect language is not carried to an excess – the ideas expressed are not obscured by over-elaborate metaphors or intricate circumlocutions of language – and is carefully guarded from every trace of pejorative connotations.

The following is an example of linguistic implication from the text on Croatia's admission to EU:

"We'll jump into cold water and start swimming, you know, but we've decided to jump into water, because we believe it will be at the end something that will make pleasure to us. What is the meaning of pleasure? Welfare for the citizens of

my country.”(by Nadan Vidosevic, Listening Class 5)

By way of contrast we might compare the above with the very explicit style of the interview given to Soviet TV by Margaret Thatcher in 1987. The animosities of the Cold War can be clearly felt as the backdrop to the British Prime Minister's straightforward denunciatory style and emphatic tone of expression.

“You have more nuclear weapons in the Soviet Union than any other country in the world! You started intermediate nuclear weapons, we didn't have any! You were the first to deploy intermediate missiles, etc.”(by Margaret Thatcher, Listening Class 7)

Generally speaking, the discourse of the various texts – the way the different characters refer to each-other, the language they use in presenting their opinions – is built on the values of mutual acceptance between people and the essential dignity of the individual as such. The following citation is from Enrique's interview – it expresses his feelings towards the tutor, who is helping him overcome his illiteracy:

“My tutor, I think, has a lot of patience... she doesn't get mad... I have a problem, she understands me...” (Listening Class 4)

The next two statements are cited as descriptions of an autistic boy by his classmates – the attitude they express is clearly one of acceptance and empathy:

*“Ben, I find a quite interesting person, quite entertaining...”
“He brings a different point of view...” (Listening Class 14)*

Ben – the autistic boy himself – when describing his own person evinces a reflective awareness about his special identity expressed through the language of self-respect:

“I am clearly OK: clever, occasionally funny and a bit mad...” (Listening Class 14)

In the same vein, Rosie, the autistic protagonist of the documentary says:

“I wouldn't swap my autism for anything. My autism makes me who I am.” (Listening Class 14)

The above citations are not only illustrative of the values communicated by their speakers – they also serve as examples of the didactic function fulfilled by the texts in which they are incorporated. Under the influence of this kind of discourse and of the attitudes and realities which it embodies the students become more curious intellectually (their interest in other cultures and alternative human identities is aroused) and at a deeper level more broad-minded in the way they perceive and judge that which is different from the settled ways of life in their society.

Fifthly, another key element that tends to promote the intercultural dimension as evidenced in our online texts is the frequent use of stylistically charged active and passive structures. It is well-known that the use of the passive is associated with an impersonal and objective view of things and situations. The lecture on liberty delivered by the leader of the opposition in Burma makes frequent use of passive structures. This stylistic approach chimes in very perfectly with the principle object of the lecture which is to focus on liberty as a fundamental human value rather than to give vent to personal feelings by means of identifying culprits and making direct accusations (the leader of Burmese opposition has served time in prison as punishment for championing the cause of freedom and democracy). Passive structures help the lecture to focus on the issues involved rather than the persons, the way out rather than pointing a finger to the bad guys. The lecture speaks the language of reason, but the idea of freedom discussed in it comes out as neither abstract nor unattainable in practice. On the contrary, the online audience listens to the inspiring examples of many champions of freedom for different times and civilizations, as if to point out that it requires an act of individual will for the lofty ideal of freedom to be embodied in the here and now of daily human experience.

Sixthly, the use of polarizing personal pronouns like “us” and “them” is not frequent. When use of such pronouns is made, it is not in order to build up artificial binary oppositions between mutually exclusive identities but rather to highlight what is special about a certain culture or social group what gives it a title to be accepted on its own merits and terms without being forced to conform to the pattern of what constitutes the mainstream in a given society.

“They (= normal people) don't mean to be mean, but it hurts my feelings because of my sensitivity...” (Rosie)

"I just don't feel lonely with them around." (Tony)

"They didn't understand I had autism." (Ben)

"I think things will get much better when we (= the autistic) grow older.... It's worth getting to know us." (Rosie)

The analysis of the various features of discourse in the listening texts points to the conclusion that such online materials are great promoters of intercultural knowledge, values, attitudes and skills, not only through the ideas that they serve to express but, in a more subtle way through the medium of expression, i.e., websites. Teaching through websites has an incomparable advantage over the traditional listening class in that it provides a fuller and more meaningful context to the materials that the students use for listening practice. A richer context makes for a greater stimulus to see beyond the purely linguistic element of the texts into the cultural horizon that is opened up before the listener.

5.2 Critical discourse analysis of the students' comments in the forum

The same type of analysis could be made of the listening activities – the debates and discussions carried out during the reflection stage of the listening classes – and of the comments of the students posted on the forum.

The object of the listening activities contained in the task sheets and of the post-listening ones posted by me on the forum was the enhancement of the skills involved in exploring and making sense of new information rather than the rote memorization of new facts as such. The activities include comprehensive text analyses, thoughtful reflection on the issues involved and discussions on the website's forum. The students were asked to adopt a critical approach in their analyses, which proved to be quite a challenge since they had to confront a plurality of perspectives and opinions on complex issues. Such a procedure helps to stimulate the students' critical thinking in the sense that they learn to see things from a higher vantage point which recognizes the legitimacy of diverse values and identities, even though they might not conform to the students' own cultural preconceptions. Such tasks as making comparisons between the new information and what the students already know or have long taken for granted, interpreting experiences and exchanging thoughts and ideas with each-other share the common aim of helping the students develop their critical skills and raising their awareness on the inexhaustible variety of forms of cultural life in the modern world.

The following are some of the questions posted on the forum which invite the students to discuss and debate:

- *Is Christmas celebrated in your country? In what ways? How similar/different do you find these celebrations with the ones in the extract? What Christmas gifts would you like to receive?*
- *I would invite you to discuss the ideal living situation for a university student in Albania and compare living in an apartment, house and dormitory. Debate on their advantages and disadvantages in terms of privacy, price, space and location. How is the Albanian context different from the western context regarding this point?*
- *In your culture who are mainly responsible for saving money and paying for college: parents or children? (Is it the same in the West?) If children pay at least part, what values can they learn from such an experience?*
- *Do you think the choice of Angelina Jolie should serve as an example for women in general? How do people in your culture perceive this act? Leave a comment.*

In order to find out about the intercultural dimension as it presents itself in the discussions on the forum we have undertaken a detailed examination of the students' discourse. It has to be pointed out that such a procedure presupposes a strong command of the language on the part of the students. In other words, the students have to be able to make use of different stylistic registers and choose between alternative linguistic forms as means of expressing an idea, for the critical instrument of discourse analysis to be fully effective with regards to the object we have set before us - analyzing language as a means of finding out about the promotion of the students' intercultural competence through the use of websites.

In our case, this fundamental condition is not entirely fulfilled since our students' grasp of English is such that sometimes a particular usage is forced upon them as the only available option for the expression of their opinions. Accordingly, their use of stylistic and rhetorical devices is rather meager and not always consistent with the general tendency of their remarks. The students tend to use a straightforward language, which sometimes is marred by grammatical errors, infelicitous use of words and phrases. Nevertheless, the overall picture that we get from the discourse analysis of the students' comments on the forum points unmistakably to an increased intercultural awareness which should be attributed to the web-based methodology that was followed in our listening classes.

The analysis shows that:

1. The students back up their thoughts and opinions by making systematic references to the institutional sources (the BBC, VOA, etc.) from which the listening materials were chosen. For example, they compare the

coverage of the protests in Turkey by the BBC and VOA pointing out significant differences in the content and style of the reports, and then relate such diverse perspectives to their own viewpoint.

"The BBC news is more explicit... the BBC report is more like a matter-of-fact report." (Ilda's comment, Listening Class 12)

The students, thus, learn to interpret news critically looking for implicit assumptions and conversations in the representation of events.

2. The students' discussions exhibit multiple viewpoints on the topics and issues for consideration. The way discussions are conducted on the forum echoes the models from the online materials – the issue for discussion is plainly stated while the opposing arguments and perspectives that go into the debate are presented in an orderly way, with the students showing due respect of each-other's thoughts and opinions. This approach fosters the students' dialectical skills and powers of reasoning as they compare and interpret different phenomena from different cultures. The end result is that students evolve a more nuanced perspective on things which helps them gain a better understanding of the world they live in. The comments of most of the students about various topics exhibit great coherence and a powerful argument. (See students' comments on *Public holidays – Christmas, College life, Abortion Law Vote Polarizes Ireland, etc.*)

Example: *Abortion Law Vote Polarizes Ireland*

(The comments have been cited without any additions or corrections.)

Rajmond's comment: *On Abortion*

"My personal opinion is that abortion is to kill a human being with self consciousness. I think adoption is a much greater way to deal with an unwanted pregnancy. There are many couples in the world that would love to have children but are unable to due to a medical problem. Couples like these would love to adopt one of these babies.

But let's see this topic in a different way. What if a 13 year old girl is raped? What does she have to do with her life? She is just a kid and she doesn't know much about life.

I also know that during the abortion both lives (mother and the child or fetus) are in danger. I also know that women who abort during their first pregnancy is 50% risk for not having a baby any more.

I'm telling these facts to understand the pressure that is on those women. What choices do they have to do?

Once I have heard about a poll made in USA. There were two countries, the first one allowed abortion and the second forbid it. After twenty years the country who forbid the abortion had a normal life with minor crime because it was a strong healthy family but on the next country the crime was rising. Children and families had problems with stress, drugs and other difficulties.

An average of about 1.3 million abortions are done in USA each year. Most women feel guilty after having an abortion. Abortion promotes careless behaviors amongst people.

I would like to end this discussion with the words of a famous pop singer Michael Jackson, Heal the world; in the world, there are people dying, if you care enough for the living, make a better place for you and for me."

Elena's comment:

"I totally support this bill, because we are talking about serious medical problems here that can take the life of a woman and abortion is her only way to survive, so I think that the government of Ireland has done the right choice to approve that law. It's sad hearing the story of that Indian woman who died. I can understand Rajmond in every word because there can be a lot of reasons that force women to face abortion and a lot of times they are forced by a lot of circumstances, especially nowadays that the society is facing a lot of serious problems. Albania faces a lot of abortions and among other reasons, this has to do with the mentality as well, for example a single mother in Albania is not seen as a single mother in other european countries or in America..."

Damian's comment: *Abortion law, why is it necessary?*

"In my opinion, Abortion Law in Ireland is just sensual. What was happening in this country, where a woman died because the hospital authorities didn't allow her to abort her baby was quite scandalous. I don't think that abortion is a solution but in an extra-ordinary situation where the woman's health is risked or the baby is a consequence of a rape abortion should be allowed. The decision of hospital authorities in Ireland was just absurd, because it is completely unimaginable to prevent a woman from the right to live.

It's also unacceptable the influence of the Ireland Church in a country which is a member of EU. The modern societies

have separated the state from the religion. The state is laic and the religion is a human right."

3. The students' comments are rich in cultural and intercultural vocabulary (general and proper nouns):
"Public holidays – Christmas": tradition, Christmas, global festivity, western culture, "they have combined the traditional part with what is considered of American origin.", borrowed symbols, love, united, different traditions, peace, tolerance, human love, unique, a Christian, a Muslim, non-religious, everyone's celebration, reunion, the USA, typically American, "symbols penetrating to our culture", mutual respect, one's identity, different people, respect each-other's religion, multicultural world, to cohabit, etc.
"Family values": universal values, common to all cultures
"College life": choose one's own lifestyle, integration, abroad, European standards, follow the best examples, freedom, students' rights, raise our voice, make your own decisions, a big world, etc.
"The ideal date": different mentality, open-minded, "in Albania things are changing for better", be yourself, "I liked the extract because the girl was talking to her father about her first date. This doesn't happen in my place...", times are changing, tolerant, democratic environment, without frontiers.
"VIP News": Albania, developed countries, Kylie Minogue, Osborne's wife, different people – different minds, we (inclusive), our society, share the experience, in my point of view, break a taboo, raise awareness, origin, values, judged and misjudged, a choice.
4. As concerns stylistic usage we can say that the communication between students is very open and straightforward showing a willingness to take an unprejudiced view of alternative opinions. The general tone of the discussions and debates is friendly and respectable, while the language itself is free of offensive words and expressions even when the controversy becomes heated. The relative absence of highly suggestive figurative language, insinuating and circuitous ways of asserting one's views and complex syntactical patterns (the active is significantly more common than the passive), though to a certain degree conditioned by the students' imperfect command of English, can be interpreted as a reflection of the students' unprejudiced openness towards other cultures and the new ways of seeing which they embody, their reluctance to tag a simplistic label to what is different and new or to uncritically protect their confirmed habits of thought through a smokescreen of confusing wordiness.

"I am a Muslim, but I like to celebrate Christmas..." (Iris, "Public holidays – Christmas")

5. The students manifest an impressive awareness on the intrinsic value of each individual's identity in a culturally pluralistic society.
Example

Noone should be ashamed of one's identity, a multicultural world, different people, different ways, different minds, one's own lifestyle, etc.

The same awareness is sometimes evinced by means of contrasts and oppositions:

Albania – abroad/western traditions; the Albanian – the American/the European, etc.

6. The high level of participation in the discussions is another key indicator of the effectiveness of our online classes in promoting the students' intercultural competence. Statistically speaking, 90% of the students have used the website to express their opinions at least on one occasion – many have used it much more frequently – while the dynamics of participation show a remarkable uniformity with the exception of one or two materials which drew an increased amount of commentary (the material on Angelina Jolie received 18 comments). The advantage of our online classes over the traditional teaching methodologies is not limited to the quantity of participation (in a traditional class much fewer than 90% the students make an active contribution in class discussions) – the quality of the students' comments is also remarkably higher. Thus, the students' comments tend to be more fully-developed, more coherent and better argued when they are posted online than what is generally the case in a foreign language classroom. Moreover, one can discern a progressive qualitative improvement while following the sequence of the comments in time: the early comments tend to be too long for the dynamics of communication in an online forum, they are descriptive rather than critically argumentative, somewhat self-enclosed and self-referential (the students refer over and over again to their own sphere of experience, while each individual comment seems like a prefabricated

construct which do not respond logically to what comes before it) and stylistically a bit dry and unexpressive. As the tasks on the forum follow one-another, we witness an increased level of interaction and cooperation among the students, greater creativity in the discussions a tighter coherence of thoughts and ideas and greater ability in making comparisons, interpretations and generalizations about cultural phenomena which indicates a development of their intercultural competences. All these facts suggest that the online forum as a medium makes for effective communication. It enhances the students' sense of responsibility in expressing themselves (their thoughts and opinions, being posted online, should stand the scrutiny of a potentially unlimited audience) and gives them the necessary time and comfort to make observations and speak their thoughts unhampered by the inevitable constraints and tensions of the classroom.

Example:

The comments on "Public Holidays – Christmas" manifest a wide range of diverse opinions on the way Christmas is conceived but they share a common positive attitude which finds expression in messages like "Be together and happy", "a family reunion", "tolerance and respect for each-other", "I am a Muslim but I like to celebrate Christmas".

7. The discussions have a well-defined focus – the students follow the line of argument as they respond critically and with all due regards to the ethics of communication to each-other's thoughts and opinions.

Examples:

I agree with..., I have a different opinion..., I partly agree..., In my pinion..., from my point of view..., My opinion is somewhat different..., I read all the comments about Chrsitmas... I agree with some..., I like the comment of Ilir ..., Yes, I agree with you, I don't share the same opinion with ..., As Klara said...

Such comments speak of increased intercultural awareness.

Example: *My Autism and Me*

I am surprised that the autistic girl has accepted her problem. (Eni)

She has brought her world to ours. (Rajmond)

It's the first time I meet an autistic person who accepts the problem, I see normal people with certain defects in the body (that can be changed) who don't accept their body. (Risa)

The film opened my eyes. (Risa)

Here in Albania we lack the empathy, we don't keep them close, so the pain of parents is much higher – our society is deaf towards this group. (Ilda)

People are deaf because they lack information about it. Why don't we share this video on the Facebook? (Ilir)

Why don't we make a small project and visit the school of mentally disabled kids in Korca? (Lubin)

It is true that the writing of the students is not always crystal clear, but this can be made up for as they develop their language skills through continuous practice.

6. Conclusion

The context which provides the general framework for this study is the ever-expanding role of information technology in contemporary society and the parallel trend towards closer contact and more intense communication between different cultures in a globally integrated community of peoples. It is only natural that the field of education in general and that of SLT in particular should reflect these macro trends in the dynamics of contemporary civilization. The actual question towards which the facts and arguments presented in this study are directed is whether the employment of web-based methodologies in SLT enhances the promotion of the intercultural dimension of such teaching. In order to give a fact-based answer to our academic inquiry we followed an experimental approach by carrying out a project on teaching English through websites (this involved the creation of a dedicated class website serving as a virtual environment for our English classes). Our conclusions are based on a critical discourse analysis of the online listening texts which the students used as primary materials for their tasks during the course of the project and of the comments which they posted on the topics of these materials and other related issues on our website's forum. The ready availability of institutional sources of high authoritativeness on the web, the multitude of perspectives on cultural issues which they present, the diversity of opinions that the students bring to the issues under discussion on the online forum, the high frequency of the use of words with a marked intercultural significance in the materials and in the comments, the foregrounding of an intercultural perspective as the vantage point from which a topic is presented - these and many other

such indicators presented and analysed in our study point toward the conclusion that the adoption of websites as tools and media in SLT has a remarkable catalytic effect in the promotion of the students's intercultural competences.

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