

# Study Abroad and Service Learning Assisting Students in Learning Croatian Language

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**Abstract**—The goal of this paper is to connect the framework of the interactive multimedia project AFILC (Assisting Foreigners in Learning Croatian) with the study abroad and service learning experience of exchange students in the University of Zagreb. The purpose of the AFILC is to develop language learning materials that will motivate foreign students to learn the Croatian language at their own pace and help them cope with its grammatical richness. The purpose of the international service learning course is to motivate exchange students to deeply experience Croatian language and culture and to get insight into the relevance of their service experiences to their personal, career, educational and civic goals.

**Keywords**—Computer assisted language learning (CALL), the Croatian language, foreigners, International Service Learning (ISL), multimedia

## I. INTRODUCTION

International Service Learning (ISL) can be conceptualized as the intersection of three different educational domains: service learning, study abroad and international education [4]. 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.

### A. Study Abroad

Students study abroad for various reasons. Some study abroad to raise their job prospects, improve their proficiency in a foreign language, or study under an expert in the academic field [16, 30].

Others study abroad to find personal freedom, seek adventure, or gain understanding of another culture [7, 22, 31].

Regardless of the reasons, research shows that students who study abroad become able to learn more about world affairs and increase their acceptance of other nationalities. Increasing international responsibility can change people's attitudes that can in return affect public opinion and potentially impact foreign policy [31].

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Students can develop new perspectives on academic subjects and real-world issues, achieve proficiency in a foreign language, experience personal growth, and develop valuable career skills [30, 35]. Other benefits of study abroad have been identified as an increase in global awareness and a change in attitude [11].

Through study abroad, students can build global competence, become skilled at interacting in and between multiple cultures and capable of analyzing issues on a global level.

Study abroad influences student learning and personal development [7, 21, 27, 28].

Research has also shown that study abroad improves students' global perspective, world mindedness and cross-cultural awareness [1, 5, 13, 25, 26, 29]. Study abroad has also been found to make students aware of their own national identity and influence how they view people from other nationalities [12, 14]. Exchange students are also able to develop a deeper interest in the well-being of others, an understanding of multinational economic and cultural issues, an increased self-awareness, and increased interpersonal competence [27].

Despite many benefits of studying abroad, students also face many difficulties when participating in study programs abroad, the major difficulty being the lack of knowledge of a foreign language [6, 30].

### B. International Education

In recent years there has been an increasing appeal for university students around the world to participate in meaningful international educational experiences during their university careers. International education is defined as educative effort that aims at fostering an international orientation in knowledge and attitude [20].

It also connotes the various kinds of relationships – cultural, intellectual and educational among individuals and groups from two or more nations including the various methods of international co-operation, understanding and exchange. It can also be regarded as a process, a movement of people and ideas across frontiers [19]. According to these authors [19], the essence of international education lies not so much in its association with a particular location, but rather in an association with the crossing of frontiers, be they physical or intellectual [18].

International organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF perceive international education as a means of international cooperation, intercultural competence and support.

### C. Service Learning

Service learning (SL) is a teaching method that connects the goals of higher education with the needs of society by providing programs of public service that encourage students to utilize classroom knowledge to improve local communities [15].

As a teaching strategy, service learning is currently present in all institutional types and across all fields of study in the United States colleges and universities (see: [www.compact.org](http://www.compact.org)). Its growth in the U.S. is both due to the work of Campus Compact (a national coalition of more than 1,100 college and university presidents supporting student education for responsible citizenship; see: [www.compact.org](http://www.compact.org)) and Learn and Serve America (a program initiative of the Corporation for National and Community Service - U.S. agency of the federal government; see: [www.nationalservice.org](http://www.nationalservice.org)).

As a relatively new teaching strategy, it also gained prominence in Europe's higher education system in the last decade.

The information science curriculum in the United States applies service learning to facilitate students helping local NGO's on projects related to course topics, such as database design or to connect the students of information science courses with the local schools to provide tutoring in the software applications they are using in class.

Benefits of these service learning projects are reciprocal to both the non-profit organizations that lack monetary resources and to the students learning the problems of the organizations and the potential solutions through technology. Benefits to students also include interacting with real clients and learning interpersonal skills critical to their future career.

### D. International Service Learning

Apart from studying abroad, in international service learning programs 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 [24]. 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 [3].

This paper presents the conceptual framework for connecting AFILC project (Assisting Foreigners in Learning Croatian) [37] 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.

## II. MOTIVATION AND BACKGROUND

In recent years, the progress of information and communication technologies (ICT) enables computer-assisted language learning (CALL), where computer systems support language learning without time and space limit. Extensive research has been carried out to develop language learning courseware for foreign language learners in order to improve listening, reading, and writing skills [8].

Most studies show significant results on CALL contributing to reading and listening skills due to the high level of hardware and software solutions supporting technology enhanced learning [40]. However, CALL has recently also showed success in the development of speaking skills (communicative competence - ability to engage in meaningful conversation in the target language).

Regarding the student feedback on satisfaction with CALL, most of them agree that the writing lesson materials designed using CALL are much more attractive, interesting and relaxing than the traditional writing lesson materials. On the other hand, teachers believe that they can save the teaching time by using CALL instead of writing the materials on the board repeatedly.

They are able to explain the lessons more systematically because the materials have been designed and organized electronically in advance. The teacher can also replay the materials to reinforce the important parts if necessary [39].

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.

### III. 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. The following sections will describe in detail both parts of the framework. 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.

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 offered by our Faculty.

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.

### IV. DESIGN OF THE SYSTEM ASSISTING FOREIGNERS IN LEARNING CROATIAN

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).

#### *A. Learning Modalities and Cognitive Styles in the AFILC System*

Learning modalities are sensory based and refer to the primary way our bodies take in information through our senses: visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile.

On the other hand, cognitive styles represent a consistent approach to organizing and processing information, typical modes of problem solving, thinking, perceiving and remembering. Global style learner is one who processes information and sees the perceptual field as a whole, more socially oriented person, while the analytic style learner can easily break the field down into its component parts and is not influenced by the existing structure.

The students from our target group need a constant link between the learning content and real life situations because it is very important for them to quickly adapt in everyday life. Therefore, they are global style learners. The main feature of the global cognitive style is the establishment of interaction between the user and the language used in everyday communication. Instead of classical learning, where a user gets a textual hint in the parenthesis, AFILC uses the graphical



Therefore, the tests are created for beginning level of knowledge, they are not time limited and users are able to work with the exercises at their own pace. AFILC also offers the possibility of self-evaluation after solving the exercises. Upon completing a given task, users can see the correct answers immediately and get an insight into their mistakes.

Knowledge testing is conducted in a form of a quiz. The following question types are used: multiple choices, matching, filling in the blanks and short answers.

Essay questions are not used since they are "reserved for spoken and written production" and since an individual learning a foreign language for the first time cannot perform self-evaluation on this type of question. The primary purpose of the AFILC software is acquiring basic knowledge of the Croatian language.

An example of an educational activity for knowledge assessment that is used in AFILC is given below. Explained example is graphically represented in Fig 3.

#### **Description of activities**

**Unit:** general knowledge related to Croatian culture.

**Communication themes:** vocabulary knowledge check, understanding the questions, mastering general culture.

**Learning content:** nouns, verbs, pronouns, numbers, colors

**Mode:** individual

**Degree:** beginner level

**Purpose of the educational activity:** acquiring Croatian vocabulary and proper usage of the terms in a given context. The aim is that users master correct writing and adopt general Croatian culture.

**Exercise description:** the interactive crossword appears on the computer screen with fields that users have to fill in. Below the crossword, there are questions in English. Questions and fields in the crossword have to be matched by the same number. Answers to the questions have to correspond to fields in the crossword. At the end of each line in the crossword puzzle there is an interactive button. After entering a term, users can click on the button to get the feedback on the correctness of their answer. Exercises can be repeated as many times as necessary.

#### **D. Lexical Issues of Cases and Verb Forms**

The most common problem in mastering the Croatian language is production of meaningful sentences using appropriate verb forms and cases. Since this project is for beginning level of learning, our aim is to create a good foundation for later learning process so that the user could better master the higher levels of the Croatian language.

AFILC concentrates on mastering the basic verb forms only; simple present, simple past and simple future tense because we believe those are necessary for basic communication. The user is presented with only two cases, nominative and accusative, out of seven altogether.

We provide the user with examples of noun inflection for the two cases so that he/she can gain basic knowledge for further understanding of the rest of the cases and corresponding inflections. The reason why we chose the

nominative is because it is a neutral case, used for the nomination. On the other hand, accusative case is taught second since it is the most common case after the nominative case and has a simple meaning that can be a good learning material in beginner level communication.

AFILC tries to resolve the problem of acquiring different verb forms and cases by forming thematic units that are used for basic communication phrases for getting around in space and time.

In the unit with verb forms, we have initially included

- (1) *Moje ime je Marko* → *tko? Marko*
- (2) *Ja sam Marko.* → *tko? Marko*
- (3) *Ovo je restoran.* → *što? restoran*
- (4) *Ovo je ptica.* → *što? ptica*
- (5) *Jedem ribu.*
- (6) *Jest ću ribu.*
- (7) *Jeo sam ribu.*

Fig. 4 Cases: nominative and accusative.

adverbs of time at the beginning of sentences in order to help users to master simple present, simple past and simple future.

Afterwards, we form sentences without adverbs of time. Together with verb forms we introduce the accusative case.

For the beginning level, it is important that users know to which questions the cases respond to. This would ease the proper use of cases.

Nominative case will be demonstrated on the example of people introducing each other (Fig 4 – examples 1, 2) or on explanation of words and concepts (Fig 4 – example 3). Learning the accusative case by the help of a verb that can be followed by a direct object (such as *jesti* – to eat, *piti* – to drink or *gledati* to look) will clarify the difference between nominative and accusative case (Fig 4 – examples 5, 6, 7).

In addition to the textual content, pronunciation of words or whole sentences is essential in order for the user to hear the difference between the nominative and accusative case, which will be emphasized all the time.

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. A user has to recognize what action is presented and provide the correct verb form in simple present,

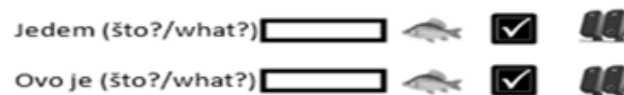


Fig. 5 Nominative and accusative case.

simple past and simple future tense.

Fig. 5 shows the exercise for noun inflections in the nominative and accusative case. By the help of photos, a user has to fill in the blanks in the sentences. After filling in the

blank, a user clicks the check-box button on the right side and the software provides feedback on the correctness of the answer. In either case, a user gets an explanation why the answer is correct or why it is incorrect. After that the user may click on the button for pronunciation of the sentence, which enables hearing the difference between the nominative and accusative case.

The goal of this type of exercise is for the user to understand the differences between the nominative and accusative case both in terms of grammar and pronunciation.

Grammar definitions and inflection rules are not sufficient for successful language learning.

Through interactive exercises, video clips, animation, and pronunciation, users will master Croatian grammar and spelling much quicker and easier than by using textbooks.

The AFILC software provides exercises and explanations, and users will be given feedback so they learn on their mistakes. The educational content is not comprehensive, since the program is designed for beginning level of language learning.

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 described in the next 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.

#### V. 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.

The advantages are: wide access (students will be able to complete their reflection activities on their own schedule) and adaptability to the new technology and new environments [9]. 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.

#### VI. 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 they 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.

## VII. 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 can also help Croatian students to develop the intercultural competence and cultural sensitivity, overcome the stereotypes and prejudices related to other communities [33] 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, 36, 38] 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 [32] civic attitudes [17] and transformational learning [23].

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.

## VIII. 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 [15] (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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