

# ***Content language integrated learning as a driver for enhanced graduate employability***

## ***A cross-cultural study between Austria and the Czech Republic***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Due to increasing international cooperation between enterprises, a profound understanding of intercultural aspects has become a major driver for labour market developments, especially in cross-border regions. Consequently, higher education institutions have to prepare future graduates for global citizenship and cultural literacy. Not only do they need to educate students to be proficient in their subject areas, they also have to keep a critical eye on graduate employability. The need for a richer skill base may go beyond technical expertise and also embrace factors such as foreign language skills, intercultural competencies, conflict management and communicative effectiveness.

In this vein, this article is devoted to a cross-cultural analysis that addresses the needs of the corporate sector enterprises in Upper Austria and the Czech Republic. A specific focus is placed on companies that operate in the fields of informatics, civil engineering, logistics, and mechanical engineering. It is sought to identify key factors for graduate employability and explore how linguistic diversity may be an asset for the labour market in this cross-border region. The main objective of this research is to investigate how foreign language learning (German, Czech and/or English) may be incorporated in technical degree programs to generate an added value for both graduates and local industries. To find out about regional corporate requirements that also embrace transversal skills, a qualitative study based on expert interviews was conducted. Key informants with long-term industry experience were identified in such a way that they can act as gate-openers and bridge-builders between industry and academia. It was sought to explore localized corporate practices and market needs with regard to technical, linguistic and cultural diversity with regard to the four investigated disciplines. The results of this study are used to revise and, if applicable, improve existing curricula and enrich the didactic design of the relevant study programs with content language integrated learning (CLIL) elements. Such a language enrichment measure has the potential to increase L2 proficiency and facilitate communicative effectiveness in the foreign language. As such it may add to enhanced graduate employability of the investigated Austrian-Czech cross-border region and promote global citizenship.

**Keywords:** Graduate employability, cross-cultural, Austria, Czech Republic, intercultural competence, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), higher education

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, an increasingly globalized world has left its traces on both individuals' and corporate lives. In this vein, internationalization has become a major theme for both industry and academia (Yang, 2015). Due to growing cross-border cooperation between enterprises, international activities, also among higher education institutions (HEIs), have become more and more central. Furthermore, in view of global markets and interconnected networks a profound understanding of cultural aspects together with a toolkit of transversal skills has evolved into a valuable asset for the labor market. As a consequence, employability has turned into a key issue for higher education, even more so against the background of a swiftly changing employment sector (Sarkar et.al, 2016). Therefore HEIs need to equip future graduates with an appropriate skillset that goes beyond narrow disciplinary boundaries (Chydenius & Gaisch, 2016). In other words, degree programs increasingly incorporate elements of foreign language skills, linguistic improvement, intercultural, personal and social competencies as well as conflict management and interdisciplinary expertise (Jackson, 2014; Precision Consulting, 2007). With regard to the employment sector, it was found that an in-depth analysis of the labor market requirements as well as a profound understanding of the needed attributes may facilitate the cooperation between local industry and academia across the world (Jackson, 2016). To this end, it is necessary to ascertain the needs of local industries regarding social and economic developments to sift out potential deficiencies of educational backgrounds.

With this in mind, this contribution gives an overview of the theoretical framework as well as the definitions of the terms used. Then, the research objectives, the research methodology and the empirical findings are sketched. The paper concludes with insights into the perceived needs for enhanced graduate employability, cultural diversity and linguistic requirements for local labor markets in Upper Austria and the Czech Republic. Finally, conclusions are drawn of the benefits to enrich the didactic design of technical degree programs (informatics, logistics, civil and mechanical engineering) by means of CLIL in this cross-border region.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

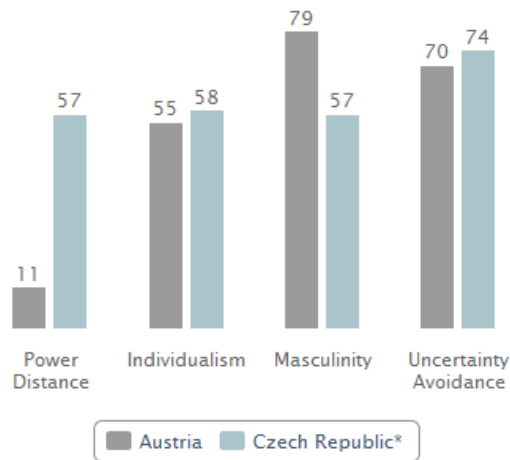
### 2.1 Cultural aspects in Austria and the Czech Republic

Culture can be understood as an abstract concept whereby the definition of the term can be adapted and modified depending on the meaning of the context and subject. Many researchers (e.g. Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1925; Hofstede, 1984; Hall, 1976, 1997; Schwartz, 1992, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997, House et al, 2002) have dealt with the concepts of culture and the cultural patterns, which can be described and measured along the lines of cultural dimensions, standards or specific typologies. Although in the majority of cross-cultural investigations the individual variants are of minor importance, the intercultural perspective demonstrates specific values which are generally typical of particular groups of people. Based on the different studies, culture can be identified as the basis of human acting, feeling and thinking (Hofstede, 1984) and manifests itself as a specific system of rules, norms, standards and values that influence the behavior and beliefs of people within a certain society (Thomas, Schroll-Machl, Kammhuber & Kinast, 2009).

Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) define culture as a perception of traditional ideas and values that are passed on from generation to generation through communication and symbols. These traditional ideas and values mold the character of individuals within a respective cul-

ture and influence the ways of thinking, feeling and reacting in different situations. Also Hofstede (1984) refers to the social acting, feeling and thinking and defines the term of culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (p.9).

When comparing the differences and similarities of various cultures, the characteristics of the concepts can be divided into several dimensions and standards. Regarding the Austrian and the Czech culture the dimensions of Hofstede (1984) as well as the cultural standards of Fink, Nový and Schroll-Machl (2000) reveal the essentials distinctions of both cultures. Findings concerning aspects like relationships, structures or people’s attitude to uncertainty demonstrate the challenges within cross-cultural cooperation and communication (Schroll-Machl & Nový, 2009).



**Figure 1:** Cultural dimensions of Hofstede (1984)

Drawing on Hofstede’s findings (Figure 1) it can be stated that the Czech Republic has a higher power distance than Austria. This means that the Czech Republic tends to be a more hierarchical society and accept hierarchical order and inherent inequalities more easily whereas Austria is more likely to use hierarchy only for convenience. Further, Austria was found to rank substantially higher on the masculinity scale. This implies that Austria tends to be more driven by competition, achievement and success than the Czech Republic. Additionally, both Austria and the Czech Republic are identified to be individualistic countries with similarly high uncertainty avoidance scales. The rather high score on the dimensions of masculinity and individualism show that both countries have a strong interdependence and high preference for loosely social relationships in which individuals take care of themselves and their immediate family members. It is argued that people with these cultural patterns have an emotional need for rules as well as an inner urge to be busy and work hard (see the concept of internalized control, Schroll-Machl, 2008). Due to this role-oriented attitude, decisions within a process or a certain situation are frequently taken after careful and accurate analysis of all listed and available information in both cultures (Hofstede, 1984; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2012).

When taking a deeper look at cultural standards, an even more diversified picture emerges between these two countries. In contrast to Hofstede’s findings, individuals of the Czech Re-

public tend to be more skeptical of structures and prefer improvisation and appreciate to be act more flexibly in certain situations (Schroll-Machl & Novy, 2008). They also seem to operate more simultaneously than Austrians and consider the possibility of achieving more than one idea or goal. Furthermore, it was found that Czechs show a significant note regarding a diffuse culture, so to say that they like to mingle work and private life (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2011). Additionally, Czech citizens tend to adopt some kind of human-oriented control, which means that for persons of this culture personal interests and relationships are essential. In this vein, it can be stated that Czechs build relationship and friendships in both work and private life (Schroll-Machl & Novy, 2008). In contrast, Austrians tend to work consecutively with a rules-based control and a preference for separated work and life spheres (Schroll-Machl, 2008). While the German Cluster (House et al, 2002) was identified to be strictly adhering to rules, Austria seems to be more flexible in this regard and also bend some regulations under certain circumstances. In addition, it was found that Austrians incline to a stable self-confidence whereas individuals of the Czech culture commute between humility and hubris, notwithstanding both cultures tend to conflict avoidance in their society (Fink, Nový and Schroll-Machl, 2000).

## **2.2 Employability and Higher Education**

In view of current dynamics of the digitalized era, HEIs face continuous challenges to equip future graduates with an appropriate skillset that goes beyond narrow disciplinary boundaries (Oellinger et al, 2014; Gaisch & Oellinger, 2014). The necessity to cultivate students so that they meet contemporary needs for a trained workforce (Sin & Amaral, 2016) has become more prominent than ever. In this vein, Johnson (2015) states that “employers want highly skilled graduates who are ready to enter the workforce” (p 10) and possess a profound portfolio of skills that enables them to compete at a global level. As a logical consequence, HEIs seek to continually improve graduate employability and bridge potential skill gaps (Jackson, 2016). By sifting out potential deficiencies of educational backgrounds, it is hoped to enhance success factors that positively impact graduates’ ability to successfully and critically navigate today’s world of work (Jackson, 2014).

Unsurprisingly then that, over the previous decade, the concept of employability has attracted much scholarly attention (e.g. McGrath, 2009; Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac and Lowton, 2012; Sin and Amaral, 2016). Competencies were identified along the lines of personal circumstances (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005), life skills (Bourner & Millican, 2011), career management (Bridgstock, 2009) and further key factors such as business specific issues, interpersonal competencies and work experience (Andrews & Higson, 2008) that relevant for enhanced graduate employability. In addition to these skills, it was suggested that further abilities are required; most notably with regard to culture, language, intercultural competence and communication (Jones, 2013; 2016). Although the concept of employability is broadly used, its definitional scope is rather loose (Rothwell & Rothwell, 2016) and varies within a range of different contexts. Hence, the focus may be on graduate abilities, academic skills as well as educational outcomes, but it may also be associated with employability concerning both those in work and those seeking work (Andrews & Higson, 2008; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Others again describe employability as the aptitude to move self-sufficiently into and within labor markets to realize the capability and potential, to gain initial employment and maintain the employment to warrant sustainability within the economy (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Allison, Harvey & Nixon 2002). According to Yorke (2006) employability is defined as “a set of

achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (p.8). Following the definition of Yorke (2006), Oliver (2015) argues that in view of the challenges associated with the changing and faltering economy, employability has been set high on the agenda of higher education institutions. With this pressing educational mandate in mind, Oliver (2015) adapted the definition of employability as follows:

“Employability means that students and graduates can discern, acquire, adapt and continually enhance the skills, understandings and personal attributes that make them more likely to find and create meaningful paid and unpaid work that benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (p. 59).

This definition is in line with what Boeda et al. (2016) state, namely that employability does not only refer to the acquisition of a job but also embraces the capacity of graduates to optimally accomplish this position. Consequently, so it is argued, employability represents a major outcome of higher education (Rok, 2016). While previous work has predominantly focused on graduate employability as the acquisition of required skills, competencies and attributes, Holmes (2013) identified two more factors that impact graduate outcome while at the same time opening up the narrow lens of “possessing”. He also takes account of social and societal positioning as well as processual interactions with the environment. As previously discussed, there are numerous aspects (e.g. work experience, curricular and extra-curricular activities) that may result in enhanced employability. Yet, there is no established recipe for success or significant condition to guarantee that (Plăiaș et al, 2011). Nevertheless, being equipped with a proficient and broad toolkit of disciplinary knowledge and soft skills is certainly a major asset in the labour market (Yang, 2015; Räsänen, 2008, Gaisch, 2014). When it comes to working with internationalized enterprises, it proved to be particularly useful to possess abilities such as intercultural competence, foreign language skills and communicative effectiveness, as well as global networking (Li, 2016). To make sure that graduates can draw on such a repertoire of skills, HEIs need to adopt instructional approaches that provide their students interactively with professional and intercultural knowledge and communicative effectiveness (Räsänen, 2008). A possible didactic design is outlined in the following section.

### **2.3 Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)**

Due to the growing significance of internationalization and globalization trends, (higher) educational institutions have increasingly started to change their languages of instruction to combine language teaching and content learning (Coleman, 2006, Arnó-Macià & Mancho-Barés, 2015). Meanwhile, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has become a widely used framework (Smit & Dafouz, 2012) which has been gaining the status as a new approach to multilingualism (Fortanet-Gomez, 2013).

The abbreviation of CLIL refers to any educational approach where content and language teaching are combined within a classroom (Hyland, Shaw, 2016). In other words, this umbrella term embraces any type of program where a second language is used to teach a non-linguistic content matter (Fortanet-Gómez, 2013). The CLIL design, initially adopted at the secondary level only, has been increasingly accepted in different subjects and contexts, also at higher education. With this in mind, Dalton-Puffer (2011) defines CLIL as “an educational

approach where curricular content is taught through the medium of a foreign language, typically to students participating in some form of mainstream education at the primary, secondary, or tertiary level” (p. 183). By combining both linguistic and non-linguistic elements, it is hoped that this approach raises intercultural awareness and fosters personal abilities of the learner (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010). It also seeks to support the development regarding language usage, cognitive flexibility, communication competence and cross-cultural understanding of students; all elements that seem to provide appropriate employability outcomes for the labor market (Yang, 2015).

### 3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this research is to identify if foreign language skills (German, Czech and/or English) in technical degree programs (informatics, logistics, civil and mechanical engineering) may have the potential to increase graduate employability in the Austrian-Czech border region. Additionally, it is sought to generally detect key factors for graduate employability and identify whether intercultural competence and linguistic diversity may be an asset for the local industry of Upper Austria and the Czech Republic. It is investigated how technical study programs may be enriched with elements of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and how this didactical method may be beneficial for both higher education institutions and enterprises that operate in this cross-border region.

### 4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to get in-depth views of the required skill-set that technical graduates need to possess when entering the labor market in Austria or the Czech Republic, a qualitative study was conducted. In total, 14 expert interviews were carried out, five in Austria and nine in the Czech Republic during a period of four months (November 2016-February 2017). Table 1 shows an overview of the interview data.

**Table 1:** Overview of the interview data

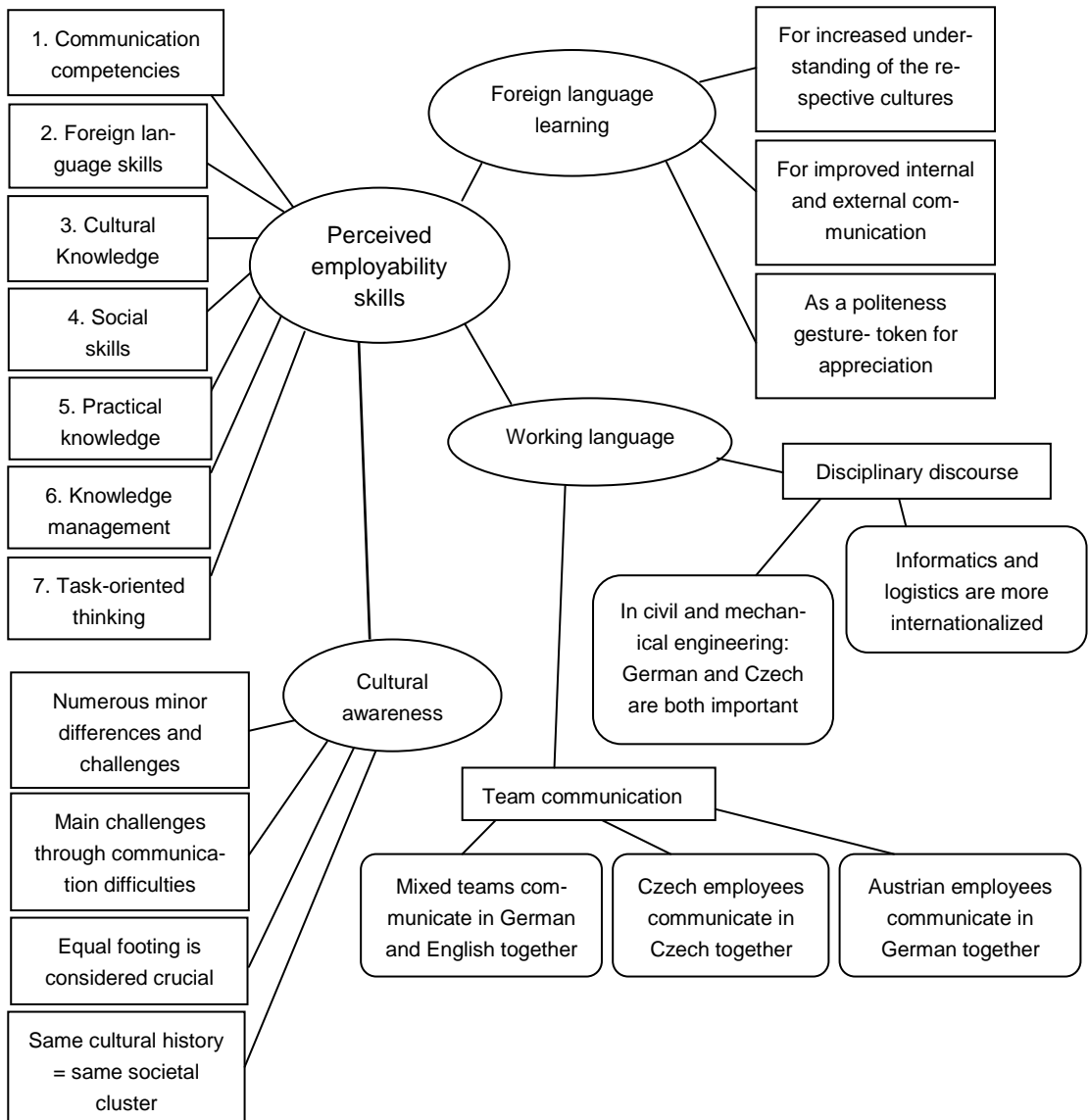
<b>Age</b>	Min	26 years
	Max	62 years
<b>Gender</b>	Male	11
	Female	3
<b>Duration of the interview</b>	Min	15 minutes
	Max	69 minutes
<b>Countries</b>	Austria	5 people
	Czech	9 people
<b>Disciplines</b>	Informatics	2 people
	Logistics	2 people
	Civil engineering	2 people
	Mechanical engineering	2 people
	Business representative *	6 people
<b>Total participants</b>		14 participants

\* Upper Austrian Chamber of Commerce, Institute for Economic Development (WIFI) and WIFI International & South Bohemian Chamber of Commerce

The subject selection was done by means of a purposive sampling (Cohen et al, 2011, p 156). Hence interviewees were hand-picked given that the informants all needed to be experts with profound knowledge of the local industry. In doing so, it was hoped to access “knowledgeable persons” that have in-depth knowledge about the investigated setting. As an analytic instrument thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to search for patterns in the data. Given that it is a relatively flexible method of qualitative research, independent of theory and epistemology, it can be “applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p 6). In this sense, we would like to position it as a constructionist method with which to identify patterns in discursive repertoires of the agents. In addition, the authors opted for a theoretical thematic analysis which is more driven by a theoretical or analytic interest of the field of investigation. In other words, data is approached with pre-defined and specific questions with the intention to delve deeper into the underlying causal mechanisms and identify particular features. It is therefore more explicitly analyst-driven. Arguably, this kind of analysis does not provide a rich description of the data. Rather, it seeks to provide a more detailed analysis of specific aspects of the dataset. In the present case, patterns were identified, shaped and grouped together by getting immersed in the data. Despite its constructivist nature, this qualitative method does not require the same level of detail in the transcript as discourse or narrative analysis do. After production of initial codes, the data was organized into broad and meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005). Then themes were searched, reviewed and refined to generate a thematic map. In what follows, is an analytic narrative that attempts to go beyond description. It is sought to relate the findings to the research questions and embed the extracts in a coherent account grounded in the data.

## 5 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

First, an overview is provided in form of the thematic map that emerged from the data. The perceived employability skills are ranked according to the priority attached. In total, four themes were identified that closely relate to employability skills, namely foreign language learning, cultural awareness, working languages, team communication and disciplinary discourse. In what follows, is an analytic account of this thematic map.



**Figure 2:** Thematic map of the key findings



The key findings relate to questions regarding perceived employability, cultural challenges, the usage of technical terms and databases within enterprises, the preferred working language and the benefits of foreign language learning (Figure 2). The results suggest that major emphasis is placed on communicative competencies including foreign language skills, followed by cultural knowledge and social skills. It is argued that diversity competence is crucial when working with interdisciplinary and cross-border teams. Here, appreciative cooperation together with intercultural competence was considered an essential component within multicultural group work of companies in Upper Austria and the Czech Republic. Apart from practical knowledge and knowledge management, communicative effectiveness (internal and external) with an eye on task-orientation was seen as a key attribute that graduates should bring to the market. In addition to a target-oriented mind-set, also cultural awareness and the ability to work independently were highlighted by the interviewed agents.

Most experts pointed out that the required practical and transversal skills of a student relate to his or her position within the company. Although graduates seem to possess a sound knowledge base in their respective disciplines, it was identified that the major skillset, especially required for climbing the career ladder, needs to exceed narrow disciplinary boundaries. In this respect, it was voiced that the capacity and willingness for life-long learning, be it in terms of, foreign language skills, diversity management, critical (self)-reflection and collaborative problem-solving skills are a prerequisite for success. Interestingly, these statements are applicable to all investigated disciplines.

Experts of both Austria and the Czech Republic agree that intercultural and ethno-relative awareness and the understanding of differing cultural backgrounds are getting more and more important in today's business life due to an increasingly globalized economy. Interestingly, almost all experts indicate that the culture in Austria and the Czech Republic appears similar in terms of behavioural norms and values of individuals. Moreover, Czech experts use such terms as "mentality" and almost all of them point to the background of the same cultural history indicating that they once belonged to the same societal cluster. In this context, it seems quite surprising that most Czech companies (according to experts from management positions) prefer using the English language and that the German language is mostly used for highly specialized technical terms. The only exception identified was the one of logistics, where the investigated experts indicated a clear preference for English, while at the same time outlining that their forwarding agents use mostly German in practice (in their own words, German is the main language of "practical logistics", probably everywhere in Europe). This trend corresponds to globalization tendencies worldwide, where the English language has become the most widely used communication code.

Interestingly, three Austrian experts outline that both cultures appear to differ in many ways, for instance, it is argued that the culture of the Czech Republic has a more hierarchical system than Austria and that individuals of the Czech Republic do not interact as self-sufficiently as individuals in Austria. Moreover, it is claimed that what is said by Austrians sometimes comes across as rather rude for the Czech interlocutors given their low-context communication style. On the Czech side, one of the interviewed experts reminded that Austria's tendency to be strictly correct in deadlines, contracts and agreements can sometimes be interpreted inconsistently: On the one hand, (usually from the Czech managers' points of view) it is admired quality, on the other hand, (usually from the workers' point of view) it can be seen as

specific moments of tension in the cooperation. These aspects also relate to the cultural dimensions and standards (Hofstede 1984; Fink, Nový and Schroll-Machl, 2000).

Nevertheless, it was stated that it is vital to be on equal and friendly terms with citizens from different cultural backgrounds and that intercultural competence builds the bridge to a respectful and effective working environment within companies. In particular, it was argued that the major challenges within cross-border cooperation arise through communication difficulties and verbal misconceptions. This leads to the conclusion that (foreign-) language knowledge plays a major role for enterprises that operate in the investigated cross-border region. Austrian companies with subsidiaries in the Czech Republic use both German and Czech for their internal communication. German and English are most often used when work assignments are given while the communication language between employees depends on the workplace or team. Obviously, Czech employees communicate together in Czech and Austrians in German. However, in specific situations they also communicate in English, notably during meetings with external partners. Surprisingly, the Austrian experts stated that in mixed working teams they mostly communicate in German or occasionally switch to English to simplify communication flows due to terminological gaps. Furthermore, it was pointed out that people above the age of 30 mainly use German for their communication whereas younger people prefer English. It was observed among the Czech interviewees that English appears to be the language of management while German was perceived as the language of technical practice.

Concerning the usage of technical terms and linguistic databases, the results show that the usage of the different languages also depends on the team or discipline. Although the experts of the Czech Republic suggest that English as a working language has become the main language within internationalized companies, all experts agreed on the necessity to acquire the technical terms in all three languages. Additionally, one unanticipated finding was that in the fields of civil and mechanical engineering German and Czech language skills appear more important than in the fields of informatics and logistics (except for the previously discussed point about differences between logistics at the business level and every-day practice). This may be ascribed to the fact that in civil and mechanical engineering fewer technical terms are standardized in English whereas informatics and logistics are both internationalized disciplines that draw on a wide range of technical terminology, typically in English (Gaisch, 2014). Moreover it was identified that just a few companies use technical tools to facilitate foreign language learning. In this respect, it was recognized that a linguistic database would simplify communication and work within companies that cooperate internationally. Additionally, it was stated that learning a foreign language may support the understanding of the respective culture and mind-set. For this, it is necessary to enhance language skills of students, possibly by means of CLIL, and to provide a tool for both universities and enterprises, in which students and employees can find relevant technical words, but also general and every-day phrases to communicate effectively.

In contrast, the vast majority of the Czech informants stated that there were already countless databases of every-day phrases and they did not feel any need of creating yet another one (even though connected to the specialized technical vocabulary). At the same time, they highlighted that a joint usage of different languages may improve internal and external communication as well as business relations, especially in this cross-border region.

A further finding worth noting is that learning the basic phrases of each other's language was identified to be a gate-opener for future business relationships. The knowledge of general phrases and cultural backgrounds seems to facilitate appreciative communication. In this

regard, the Czech agents pointed to the benefits of international cooperation in teams, during which intercultural and diversity competences grow and enrich the cooperation. Highlighted by both countries experts it came to the fore that even basic knowledge of the Czech language is seen as a sign of respect and appreciation for a country that does not belong to a dominant language community. Making oneself understood in each other's languages is considered as a token for mutual respect and appreciation in business relations. This was particularly crucial for the Czech partners that come from a discourse community of a non-dominant language.

This cross-border analysis reveals that the development of foreign language skills and intercultural competencies should be amplified in the Austrian-Czech border region to enhance intercultural exchange and positively influence the collaboration within the economy and the local industry in Austria and the Czech Republic.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Literature has shown that increasing global interdependence leads to new demands for tertiary education (Tomlinson, 2016). The expert interviews of the cross-border analysis of the Austrian-Czech border region have offered insights into current requirements of the local industry within the fields of informatics, logistic, civil and mechanical engineering as well as the set of competencies – skills, abilities and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupational fields.

It can be concluded that the investigated cross-border region requires graduates that possess both disciplinary and transversal skills, including a profound understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity. In this respect, it is argued that the enrichment of technical study programs with CLIL-based elements study programs may bring advantages regarding the development of language proficiency and enhance intercultural awareness. In addition, foreign language learning may support students to understand different mindsets und cultural backgrounds. In conclusion, it can be summarized that language skills, intercultural competencies and respectful and appreciative communication has the potential to further improve the collaboration between internationalized companies at the Austrian-Czech cross-border region.

In view of its qualitative nature, the sample of participants for this study is not representative and the results are not generalizable. Another limitation may be that the study was targeted at technical disciplines only. Future research may open up the scope and also include non-technical degree programs to identify which particular skills are most required in the investigated fields.

## 7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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