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# Foreign language learning:
## controversies of virtuality and globality

ABSTRACT
Proficiency in any foreign language or languages is very inspirational. Infinite desire, tough self-discipline and personal attempts are vitally important factors in foreign language learning. Unfortunately, this idea ends when learning difficulties appear. They can stop learners and isolate them from future progress. According to the scholars and practitioners, there is a solution – to make learning more modernized by incorporating virtual and global technologies. This study will investigate the issue of effectiveness of foreign language learning in the context of globality and virtuality discourses. Nowadays young people represent the global digital generation that demonstrates excessive and habitual use of technologies. Considering that issue, the article discusses the controversial role of globality and virtuality in learning a foreign language.
Keywords: foreign language learning, innovations, globality, virtuality

## 1. Introduction

The knowledge of foreign language(s) has become a *must-have* competency of any global person. Necessity to master a foreign language is emphasized by various European Organizations and their documents regulating education policy in every member country.

The organizations as the European Council (2010) and the Commission of the European Communities (2000) pay huge attention to the language and plurilinguism policy, which focuses on the promotion of multilingualism and language learning in the European context. The experts of Council highlight that the process of learning languages and their usage has to involve the entire

population and that has to be available for every ordinary person (*Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education*, 2010; *Memorandum of LifeLong Learning*, 2000).

Due to constant digital development and new technologies to be used in daily and professional spheres, educational systems are deeply concerned about education of a global citizen and a competent specialist who have to meet the requirements of the global society. The Council Resolution on a European Strategy of Multilingualism stresses the importance of foreign language skills development:

> [...] significant efforts should still be made to promote language learning and to value the cultural aspects of linguistic diversity at all levels of education and training, to promote variety of the European languages and to disseminate them across the world" *(Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education,* 2010, p. 17).

Taking into consideration multilingualism policy and its aspects, the importance of multilingualism and foreign language learning is relevant to a global citizen who demonstrates willingness to be an active participant in the global arena. Similarly, the Lifelong Learning policy (2000) accentuated that age and motivation are not constraints. Therefore, everyone can find an appropriate reason and place for education. The same approach was expressed in 2014 by the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council (*Conclusions on multilingualism and the development of language competences,* 2014). It was stated that linguistic diversity is a fundamental component of the European culture and intercultural dialogue and the ability to communicate in a language other than one's mother tongue is acknowledged to be one of the key competences which citizens should seek to acquire.

The presented analysis of the European policy regarding multilingualism and its relation to the usage of innovative technologies which help to integrate globality and virtuality into the foreign language learning process formulates the problem of the study as follows: a modern global society and rapidly growing innovative virtual technologies may have a positive impact on foreign language learning process, stimulate motivation to learn a language and eliminate personal obstacles.

The specific objective of the study is to investigate the students' attitude to the effects of globality and virtuality on learning a foreign language. There are two primary aims: 1) to reveal the theoretical implications of the effects of globality and virtuality on foreign language learning; 2) to investigate what virtual and global tools and/or methods are used by the students for learning a foreign language; 3) to present the students' insights and recommendations about virtuality and globality usage for a language learning. The data for this study were collected

using the content analysis of the European Union documents[1] regulating education policy in Europe and the scholarly literature sources including publications by foreign and Lithuanian authors revealing positive/negative effects of globality and virtuality on learning foreign language(s). This study used a quantitative case study approach to investigate students' attitudes. The interpretation of the study data presents important insights into functionality of virtuality and globality in the process of foreign language learning.

## 2. Globality and virtuality in the context of foreign language learning

Many educators, scholars and practitioners (Tuomaitė, 2014; Žegunienė et.al., 2012; Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Ortega, 2009; Thorne & Black, 2007) in the field of foreign language teaching discuss how to develop learners' foreign language skills and competences needed for their further personal and professional life in the 21st century. It is not enough to master languages; it is important to combine traditional skills combined with the modern ones. Therefore, the global society and its members have to acquire digital literacy skills, intercultural awareness and the ability to be flexible shifting among different modes and circumstances of communication (Richards & Renandya, 2002). That leads to a new conception of foreign language learning process. It is closer related to technologies and becomes virtual and global.

The Internet revolution has made researchers (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Aufenanger, 1999; Donath, 1998) even more aware of the importance of social context in language development and language use on a much larger cultural scale. Over the last few decades, technology and the Internet have drastically transformed our notions of social interaction. New ways of information exchange are emerging; leading us to what Warschauer (2008) calls the multi-dimensional expansion of the technological revolution. In this new era of technological expansivity we become involved in new forms of discourse; we build digital communities and engage in new forms of literacy practices. The Internet has allowed overcoming the constraints of geographical distance and providing an easy access to various cultures (both locally and globally defined) and communities of practice (Warschauer, 2008, pp. 52–67).

The changes in the technological world have modernized foreign language learning and teaching through processes of engagement in the Internet-mediated intercultural settings (e.g., Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Thorne & Black, 2007). The result of this trend is the new understanding of a language learner as a competent language user not only in face-to-face communicative situations, but also in the Internet-mediated social contexts (Thorne, 2008)

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[1] E.g., *European Union strategy for multilingualism and acquaintance with foreign languages in Lithuania* (2005).

Virtuality and interactivity (for instance, discussion boards, chat rooms, blogs, platforms, etc.) are incorporated into the foreign language learning process (Guth & Thomas, 2010). Some authors argue that it is important to direct a digital generation, its addiction to the virtual activities and frequent usage of emerging technologies, as they may help learners to develop the ability to acquire and use the foreign language in any context and environment (Guth & Helm, 2010). Newly applied technologies and their attractiveness provide an unlimited number of possibilities to explore new global areas virtually, but unfortunately, they make learners more addicted users of such technologies. Despite some negative aspects, virtuality has become an integral part of the foreign language learning process.

The other strand of this study is to look at the development of foreign language skills in a global context that could be related to the studies abroad. A common assumption raised by different authors (Leonard, 2015; Anderson, 2012; Freed, 1995) is that studying abroad and operating in the global context is particularly helpful in developing foreign language skills. Globality has a positive impact on improving learners' skills, fluency and ability to communicate (Freed, 1995).

The benefits of globality include gaining cultural awareness, developing new relationships, and learning about oneself (*Career benefits of study abroad*, 2014; *Reasons to study abroad*, 2014; *Why study abroad?*, 2014). Students can meet other international students, cooperate with them and spend time outside learning environment in this way expanding learning zone and possibilities of non-formal education. (Freed, 1998). Such formal and non-formal foreign language learning experience, when learners dynamically interact among themselves and surrounding global environment, offers a new way of language learning – language socialization, i.e., acculturation and assimilation into a global community targeted at speakers' alignment norms and conventions. The negotiation on a learner's place in a global society and a target language community is one of the turbulent processes building a new global identity or even multiple global identities under the impact of global contextual factors. An individual has to understand his or her relationship with the global world, which is implemented through language that a learner uses in different places and at different points of time. It is through language that learners gain access to powerful networks that give them an opportunity to use a foreign language (Norton, 2000, p. 5).

## 3. Virtuality and globality vs. traditionalism

The methodology of foreign language learning has been revised and developed for centuries. Scholars have demonstrated serious concern about the integration of new and traditional methods in the process of foreign language learning. Griffiths and Oxford (2014) demonstrated concern about the foreign language learning methodology. More scholars can be mentioned as Richards and Renandya (2002), Freeman and Richards (1996) who focused on how a teacher has to be prepared

for teaching a foreign language and reviewed the basic factors ensuring the efficiency of the second foreign language learning process. Lithuanian authors present an extended analysis of the application of innovations. Šiaučiukėnienė, Visockienė and Talijūnienė (2006), for instance, reviewed the organization and changes of the foreign language learning process connected with the integration of traditional and innovative methods. She emphasized that the unity of the four language skills might be expanded owing to the integration of innovative strategies combined them with traditional activities performed during lessons. That could be challenging for teachers because they have to be familiar with innovations in the education field (pp. 106–107).

Also Bijeikienė, Pundziuvienė and Zutkienė (2012) noted that the traditional teaching methods are passive, and they do not play a vital role in achieving high learning outcomes. If high expectations are set the traditional has to be combined with the innovative, which is associated with both the methods and innovative approaches towards the foreign language learning and teaching process. Innovative methods comprise new kinds of activities that are interactive, and students no longer have to be just observers but to participate actively in simulations, presentations, on-line activities and virtual games, to use the Internet (forums, chatting rooms, blogs, etc.) as well as social or educational media platforms (p. 115). Students may use such computer programs as Skype and the other interactive applications that help to communicate with the native foreign language speakers and develop foreign language skills. Mobile applications are very beneficial for daily foreign language usage, due to constant repetition of the material, new words and phrases.

A similar approach is demonstrated by Sūdžiuvienė and Tautavičienė (2011), who emphasize deliberate transition from the traditional methods and teaching strategies to more advanced technologies and innovative approaches. A variety of devices can be used in foreign language classrooms. Modern educational tools such as interactive boards, interactive tables, tablets, interactive notebooks, iPads could be successfully integrated into the language learning and teaching process. These devices contribute to the improvement of foreign language speaking, reading, listening and writing skills and motivate students to be active participants of the modern study process (p. 127).

## 4. Survey design
A humanistic perspective advocates the view that educational value is diminished if the learning process itself and the conditions in which the learning takes place are not taken into account (Nunan, 1991, p. 229). In today's society, the focus is shifted from achieving academic goals towards self-realization. As Nunan (1991) states, humanistic education basically aims at bringing about the growth of the full potential of each person. The goal of education is to help students to develop

the knowledge and skills they need for active and responsible participation in the constantly changing world (p. 229).

When learning a foreign language, it is important to develop the language and communication skills and the skills necessary for functioning in the society. In addition to acquiring the language skills, language teaching aims at the development of positive attitudes and understanding different cultures. Thus, learning a foreign language becomes much more than the mastery of the language skills. Teaching involves the acceptance of new social and cultural behaviours and the aim of understanding the members of other communities.

In order to achieve the aims of humanistic education, Stevick (1990) finds it necessary to include emotions and aesthetic experiences, work on improving social relations through virtual media, increasing responsibility and, in addition to knowledge, help students understand the global context (p. 4). That conception is supported by Dornyei and Murphey (2003). These authors emphasise that the learning a language cannot be separated from the global, virtual and social context in which it takes place. The virtual, global and social contexts affect the participants' understanding of their behaviour in the group and the role in global arena (p. 174).

The survey was initiated and performed with the students representing higher education institution in Lithuania, that is Klaipeda University. The students of this university are prepared for various business spheres. The research was completed in March – April 2018. The target group comprised 256 respondents (n=256); the instrument of the survey was a questionnaire which comprised questions revealing the modernity of foreign language learning in terms of integrating virtuality and globality. The survey investigated the students' attitudes towards globality and virtuality used in the process of foreign language learning. By employing the quantitative survey design, the authors of the paper attempted to examine the foreign language learning considering virtuality and globality and to present the students' insights and/or recommendations.

## 5. Description of the study

The demographic part of the questionnaire comprised the questions were students had to choose appropriate options. In the first option, the students had to choose between "male" and "female", in the second question they had to choose the appropriate age group: "below 20", "20–30", "31–40", "41–50", "51–60" or "61+". They were asked to indicate the year of study: "1st year", "2nd year", "3rd year" and "4th year". The respondents had to indicate their the study programme. Following question was about the foreign languages mastered. The respondents could choose English, German, Russian, French or specify any other language they learnt (more than one answer could be indicated here).

The second part of the questionnaire comprised questions regarding the aspects of virtuality and globality integrated into the foreign language learning process.

The participants had to point out the virtual and global tools and/or methods used for foreign language learning. Then the students were asked how beneficial they think such tools and methods are for a foreign language learning. Finally, the respondents were asked to present their insights and/or recommendations regarding virtuality and globality usage for a foreign language learning.

## 6. Results of the study

As stated earlier, the questionnaire was filled in by 256 students of Klaipėda University. There were 61 males and 195 females. 193 students were in the age group below 20, 63 respondents were in the group of 20–30. Majority of the students (112 students) were the 1st year students, insignificantly smaller group of the respondents (81) represented the 2nd year students, the 3rd and 4th year groups comprised of 25 and 38 students. The target group consisted of students of English (85), German (15), Swedish (12) philology, the other part of the respondents (144 students) was represented by the students of the studies of business field (Business Administration – 44, Tourism Administration – 31, Finance – 23, Accounting – 10, etc.).

Among the foreign languages learnt, 198 respondents learnt English, 50 – German, 6 – Russian. Also, other languages were mentioned, e.g., Spanish – 10 and French – 4. The data show that English was spoken by almost all the respondents.

Answering the first question the respondents had to name virtual and global tools used for foreign language learning, several options were able to choose from the provided list. The results are presented in the chart below.
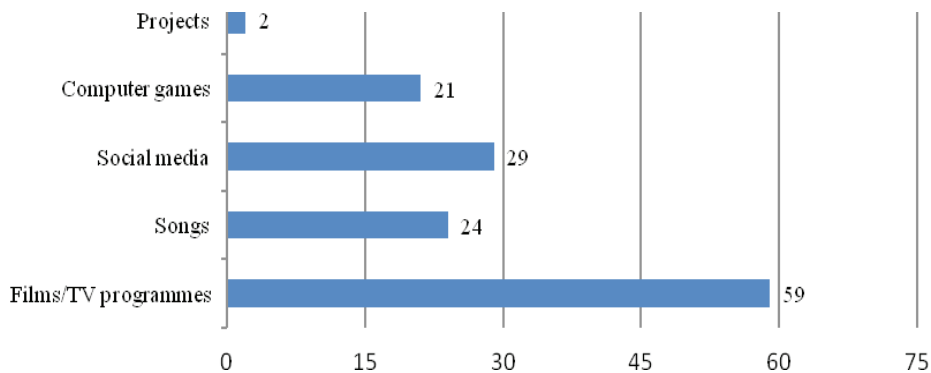


Figure 1. Innovative and global educational tools

The respondents demonstrated appropriate understanding of the innovations (virtuality and globality) used in a foreign language learning. Majority of them (59%) are interested in films or TV programs in English. Such tool is available for every learner, and it has diverse aims beside educational. The attractiveness

is to see real-life situations and have some entertainment. Modernized television and TV channels provide with the possibility to use subtitles for TV programs or films. The students may listen and read scripts, so that both skills (reading and listening) are developed. The program could be stopped in order to repeat the text or to pronounce the unknown word. Significantly smaller group (29%) uses social media as a virtual and global educational tool. Social media comprises social networks (the most popular is Youtube) and the Internet. Nowadays a *digital* generation prefers a lifestyle *online*. There are unlimited possibilities: to meet new friends virtually, communicate with the old ones in a virtual medium, participate in forums where English is used for international communication, educational websites created by teachers and for teachers, allowing exchange of experience or application of innovative learning methods, educational platforms and virtual learning environments. Songs and computer games were mentioned by respectively 24% and 21%. The activities are not so widely adapted for educational purposes. The reasons maybe the difficulty level or English used, e.g., American or Australian English or heavy accents. Computer games require time and can be referred to as addiction. Despite the disadvantages mentioned, these activities retain their educational purposes and help deepen the knowledge in a very recreational virtual and global way. Unfortunately, just 2% noted that projects could be used by the students. Nowadays almost every higher education institution is a member of Erasmus+ network. Participation in the students' exchange programs provides the possibility to study abroad. International studies give a competitive advantage and international experience which is valuable in labour market.

The survey data demonstrated students' willingness to modernize their learning process by applying virtual and global tools and/or methods, such as social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, computer games, etc.). In fact, the popularity of these networks cannot be denied because they play a vital role in students', adults' and even the schoolchildren's daily life. After the review of the survey data, it is possible to conclude that students still lack deeper perception what virtual and global technologies, tools and/or methods can be used for a foreign language learning. Nobody mentioned personal computers or iPads which are brought to the lectures or are undoubtedly used at home, virtual learning environments (Moodle), blogs, apps, new learning strategies suggested by the scientists (neuro-programing, coaching, etc.), smartphones, interactive boards/tables, etc.

Furthermore, the respondents had to express their insights how beneficial the virtual and global tools and/or methods are for a foreign language learning. The respondents' answers can be grouped into three categories. Firstly, the answer was they are "easy to use" (48 percent), the aspect of "entertainment" was indicated by 39 percent of the students. In addition, 13 percent of the respondents noted that such tools and methods "make classes more interesting/attractive".

Also, the respondents were asked to provide insights or recommendations why virtual and global tools and/or methods should be used for a foreign language learning. The common answers were as follows: virtual and global tools and/or methods enhance motivation to learn a foreign language, they (virtual and global tools and/or methods) are frequently used for personal purposes, they may be used as the sources of additional practice at home, modern technologies make learning/classes more interesting and they are easy to access, and majority of the respondents noted that by using technologies it is possible to acquire knowledge of English speaking cultures, their traditions, and that may be considered as a possibility to continue studies abroad. So, it can be concluded that innovative tools can make a positive impact on motivation, create recreational factor during studies and demand to improve and develop acquired competences and skills.

## 7. Conclusions

The question arises whether the use of virtual and global tools and/or methods in foreign language learning improve the learning or development of a foreign language skills or if it is simply a distraction. In the systematic review of studies undertaken by various scholars, it has been concluded that there are some language learning benefits of virtuality and globality usage. These virtual and global tools/methods help learners with listening and writing (particularly in the amount of writing, length of texts and discourse features of these texts), as well as with speaking and reading. However, in such a way the students may be engaged in real learning experiences not found in books. One of the dangers of using technologies is that emphasis is placed more on the technologies than the learning.

The survey demonstrated that the education system and young learners are open for innovations and virtuality and globality have to be an integral part of the process of a foreign language learning. Knowledge and skills could be acquired using computers, organizing integrated lessons and considering learning possibilities provided by different educational environments (natural and interactive). However, traditional methods (teacher-oriented method, grammar translation method, etc.) have to be related with innovative technologies (usage of smart devices and tools, interactive activities, etc.). They play an important role enhancing students' motivation, creating comfortable student-oriented learning environment.

## 8. Summary

The demand of knowing foreign languages is precisely determined in the EU legal documents and acts. This issue is relevant for the citizens of the entire Europe considering the spheres of business, economics, professional and personal life. Currently the situation in the global arena changes rapidly and it is influenced by changes in education system and labour market. Majority of young people

are engaged in international activities, projects and businesses, thus, that leads to new skills where foreign languages are a key priority. Studying foreign languages is very complicated and laborious procedure requiring long time and sustained efforts. Therefore, in order to achieve good results, the process of efficient language learning has obtained completely new approaches, study methods and practices. The modern foreign language learning approach demands application and implementation of innovative teaching and learning activities. It cannot be opposed that the 21st century, often called the *information age*, is bringing changes into traditional studying. Indeed, the capability of applying virtual and global technology in teaching foreign languages is almost infinite. Consequently, these innovations help both students and teachers to deal with foreign language learning difficulties, and according to the survey data, the students are confident of globality and virtuality and provide with the ideas of how to integrate globality and virtuality into purposeful foreign language learning.

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