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Teaching Intercultural Business English
Interkulturelles Wirtschaftsenglisch lehren

Abstract: In unserer digitalisierten, vernetzten und mobilen Welt muss ein didaktisches Konzept zur Vermittlung von interkulturellem Wirtschaftsenglisch für die heutige Generation von Studierenden mit ihren diversen Hintergründen neu gedacht werden. Es gilt, soziales Lernen und Selbstmanagement mit zu integrieren. Gemäß der Aufgliederung von Macke et al. (2016: 88ff.) von Kompetenzen in einem handlungsorientierten Ansatz in Kompetenzfacetten – fachliches Wissen, Zuständigkeit, individuelle Wertvorstellung, gesellschaftliche Normen – auf verschiedenen Handlungsstufen – verstehen, anwenden, analysieren, bewerten, entscheiden, begründen – werden die verschiedenen Lernziele zugeordnet und didaktisch aufbereitet, um soziale und fremdsprachliche Kompetenzen als individuellen Lernprozess hin zu interpersoneller und interkultureller Bildung zu lehren. Eine eigens durchgeführte Befragung über mehrere Semester belegt, dass das Konzept den gewünschten Lernerfolg hervorbringt.

Keywords: Wirtschaftsenglisch, interkulturelle Kompetenz, didaktisches Konzept

Abstract: In our world that is highly influenced by digitalisation, interconnectedness and mobility, didactic concepts on teaching intercultural business English to students with their diverse backgrounds have to be reconsidered and newly designed. Social learning and self-management have to be integrated. Hence, in the presented concept, the learning objectives are categorised according to the action-oriented systematization of Macke et al. (2016: 88ff.), in which competencies in are broken down into facets of competencies – knowledge, responsibility, value concept, norms – on various levels of complexity – understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, deciding, justifying. Didactical concepts are designed to match this categorisation of learning objectives in order to teach social and language competence as an individual learning process to also gain interpersonal and intercultural competence. The evaluation of the concept by the means of a multi-level survey has shown that the concept produces the requested success.

Keywords: Business English, intercultural competence, didactic concept

1. Preliminaries

The majority of students nowadays belongs to the so-called always-on genera-tion: digitally connected, constantly available, and highly mobile. Communication is exceedingly characterised by apps, such as WhatsApp or Twitter, that demand a reduction to ostensibly essential aspects. Thus, speed and simplification are the driving forces in communicative and interpersonal interaction. Additionally, in-creasing mobility in our globalised world challenges the foreign language compe-tence of students that enter universities with a remarkably individual knowledge concerning language, and diverse experiences regarding digital and interpersonal interaction. How can a didactic concept meet these heterogeneous needs in pro-grammes that intend to teach the professional use of Business English in a glo-balised world in which intercultural contacts are the norm? The outlined approach here goes beyond well-known models that add intercultural knowledge to Busi-ness English topics and highlight communicative skills.[1] It starts from the perspec-tive of competencies as an entrance to a successful and informed decision-making basis for (inter-)action in diverse business settings.

2. Required Competencies

2.1 Definitional Concepts

Any didactic concept first needs to analyse the required competencies as teach-ing in general aims at changing the students' professional know-how, their skills and ability to handle their knowledge as well as their overall attitude towards knowledge and science as their inner prerequisite of action in a skill-based and sustainable way (cf. Macke et al. 2016: 57). When speaking of skill-based acting, competencies should not only be conceived as the formal distinction between professional, methodological, social, and personal competence, but treated in an action-oriented understanding. Thus, they can be outlined as the interaction of four pillars of competencies, including the ability to act due to knowledge, the possibility or permission to act due to responsibility, the desire to act due to indi-vidual value concepts, and the demand to act due to appropriateness and social norms (cf. Macke et al. 2016: 70ff.). These pillars define the reference points of act-ing whereas acting itself needs to be sequenced in levels that define the degrees of difficulty and complexity of tasks from more basic requirements, such as un-

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[1] Apart from studies that simply add knowledge on how to describe and assess different cultures for business issues (as for example Tuleja 2015), Camerer and Mader (2012) for example introduced a model that describes Intercultural Communicative Competence as "hybrid competence" that con-sists of the three components "linguistic and communicative competence", "intercultural knowl-edge", and "features of personality" (cf. Camerer/Mader 2012: 90). However, that model is still highly centred on knowledge and understanding.

derstanding, applying, and analysing, to the more advanced levels of evaluating, deciding, and justifying (cf. Macke et al. 2016: 88ff.).

2.2 Classification of Learning Objectives and Competencies

When considering the professional, appropriate use of Business English in diverse contexts and settings as the final learning objective, the following competencies within the various levels of complexity should be addressed in a comprehensive and integrated language programme: foreign language skills, communication skills, self-management, and intercultural understanding. Didactically speaking, these competencies can be categorised in the four pillars within the six levels as follows:[2]

level of com-plexity	reference points of action			
	ability (knowledge)	possibility/ permission (re-sponsibility)	desire (value concept)	demand (ap-propriateness, norms)
under-standing	• C1 language skills (grammar, vocabu-lary) • communication theories • models of time-management	knowledge of different organi-sational aspects in business	awareness of • individual lan-guage skills • individual ef-fectiveness • personal set of values	awareness of dif-ferent social and cultural norms (intercultural theories)
applying	practising • grammar and vocabulary • models of commu-nication • models of prioritis-ing and planning tasks	applying knowledge of organisational aspects in busi-ness to unknown situations	phrasing • individual strategies of managing time • own set of culture-based values	practising intercultural understanding
analysing	analysing • options of lan-guage use (register, context, politeness) • speech acts and difficult conversa-tions • planning and prioritisation of or-ganisational tasks	analysing op-tions of organi-sational actions	examining • individual strategies of managing time in terms of ef-fectiveness • individual value concepts in given situations	identifying value concepts of dif-ferent cultures in diverse situ-ations

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[2] The set-up of this diagram follows the distinction of the facets of competencies of Macke et al. (2016: 91). It shows the learning goals and competencies as they are defined and implemented in the inte-grated teaching programme of Business English, Social Skills, and Intercultural Understanding in the Master degree programme *Systems Engineering* in the department of Electrical Engineering and Infor-mation Technology (dep 04) at the University of Applied Sciences Munich. For a detailed description and implementation of this programme see Brandstetter (2017).

evaluating	discussing options for actions (individually, peer-to-peer approach)	discussing options of organisational actions	self-reflecting port-folio on value concepts and time management issues	reflecting essay on culture norms
deciding	comprehensively deciding choice of action based on knowledge	comprehensively deciding choice of action based on organisational aspects	comprehensively deciding choice of action based on understanding of individual reflection	comprehensively deciding choice of action based on contextualised understanding of different social norms
justifying	justifying decision (professional perspective)	justifying decision (organisational perspective)	justifying decision (individual perspective)	justifying decision (intercultural perspective)

Table 1: Learning objectives and competencies when teaching Intercultural Business English

As shown in table 1, classical language knowledge as well as theoretical knowledge of models and theories concerning communication and time-management are situated in the field of ability whereas intercultural competence in this classification is mainly regarded as belonging to the field of demand, allowing appropriate action according to social norms. Michael Byram defined factors of intercultural communication for foreign language learners, which include knowledge (of self and other and of interaction), attitude (relativising self and valuing others), education (political education and critical cultural awareness), and skills (interpreting/relating and discovering/interacting) (2021: 44ff.), that accompany necessary dimensions of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence (2021: 60f.). All these factors and dimensions are included in the model that categorises learning objectives into facets of competencies, thus highlighting and illustrating the holistic nature and the learner perspective of this approach.

Turning to the individual value concept, the desire to act, it is characterised by different steps of reflection that help build a bridge between ability and demand. The possibility or permission to act due to responsibility should be understood as the organisational framework that is given in various business settings, as for example habits and practices in the field of marketing, crisis management, leadership, or negotiation. After having categorised the learning objectives and goals into the facets of competencies, they need to be gathered and compiled into a comprehensive didactic concept.

3. Didactic Concept

3.1 Understanding

The basis for networked thinking is thorough knowledge. As studying and working demand a high degree of time management and prioritisation, knowledge of various models in this field, such as the competency model (cf. Maxey/O'Connor 2010: 40ff.) or Eisenhower's Urgent/Important Matrix (cf. Fox 2015: 111ff.) introduces opportunities for students to reflect upon their individual situation on a scientific basis, thus fitting not only to the field of *knowledge* but also in the field of *desire* when speaking of the various reference points of action.

Additionally, to acquire linguistic knowledge, students need to be trained in Business English vocabulary and necessary grammar aspects for specific purposes and business aspects such as marketing, negotiation, or crisis management on level C1. Students accordingly gain knowledge of different organisational aspects in business concerning *possibility* in the reference point of action. Most importantly, the individual learning progress requires special attention. This means that as a first step, students need to be made aware of their own level of language skills, thus understanding their desire and willingness to act, to be able to make progress based on their individual language background.

Yet language knowledge and awareness is not enough. Language is used to interact, to communicate with people, which means that knowledge of how communication works is equally required for professional interaction. Based on a comprehensive view on theories on language, linguistics, signs, and symbols as well as a basic understanding of various fields of communication theories, four theoretical approaches on communication from the field of transactional models are examined in detail. Apart from Watzlawick's 5 axioms of communication (cf. Watzlawick et al. 1969), focussing strongly on pragmatics, and Paul Grice's maxims of communication (cf. Grice 1975), focussing on the use of words, the most prominent and most widely used model is Schulz von Thun's four pages of a message – neutral content, relationship, self-revelation, appeal – forming a square around the message and thus indicating equal importance of all four parts for successful communication (2015: 27ff.). With this model, awareness is directed to the fact that objective messages are only one part of an utterance and that unconscious information is included in any speech act. Apart from Schulz von Thun's analysis, Roman Jakobson offers with his model a more comprehensive view on forces involved in communication: He defines six indispensable factors of linguistic communication: sender, recipient, message, code, context, and contact (1993: 88ff.): A sender transmits a message to the recipient. For the transmission, a physiological contact is needed to maintain communication. Furthermore, the message needs to be embedded in a certain context so that the recipient can understand the

message. The precondition for successful communication is, however, an identical code that sender and recipient have. This model allows to not only take the involved people into account, but to also analyse the context in which communication is embedded. Thus, this model provides a linkage to intercultural aspects as contextualised form of communication, since nowadays in our globalised world shaped by mobility, interconnection, and digitalisation, language and communication for specific and specialised purposes cannot be considered detached from intercultural learning any more. Equally, as numerous scholars in the field of cultural studies have shown, language cannot be considered detached from culture as it also includes cultural aspects as medium and means of communication. Consequently, comprehensive acquisition of competencies needs to consistently integrate intercultural skills (cf. Liddicoat/Scarino 2013: 11ff.), thereby particularly addressing *demand* as reference point of action – as appropriateness of acting according to norms is highlighted there. Understanding means on the one hand acquisition of the theoretical background for intercultural communication by studying intercultural theories of Hofstede (cf. Hofstede/Hofstede/Minkov 2010) and Trompenaars (cf. Trompenaars/Hampden-Turner 2012); but on the other hand, understanding also includes the students' awareness of their own personal set of values, which is of course culture-bound.

3.2 Applying

Now that students have acquired knowledge in the four pillars of competencies, they enter the next level of complexity, where they are trained to apply that knowledge. Therefore, as a first step in personal empowerment, students phrase their own individual strategies of time management before they are asked to apply the models to given situations so that they can compare and combine own experiences with newly gained skills.

Linguistic knowledge is applied in exercises especially designed for these purposes that deal with various organisational aspects of business so that grammar and vocabulary use is contextualised and *possibility* as reference point of action for application is trained likewise. To the same degree, the knowledge of communication models is applied to given utterances from different fields of business life. This includes not only the analysis of speech acts with the help of communication models, but also the analysis of underlying structures, specifically in difficult conversations, thus following models such as Douglas Stone's theory of shared common structures (cf. Stone/Patton/Heen 2010: 3ff.) for a more comprehensive understanding of communication. Furthermore, these examples can be enriched by culturally diverse agents so that intercultural knowledge, after the students have phrased their own set of culture-based values as starting point, must be applied correspondingly to explain given situations. However, applying intercultural

knowledge must also include practising understanding. Therefore, students are given specifically designed listening comprehension tasks on authentic audio-visual material dealing with different business aspects so that they do not only enrich their intercultural competence in terms of experiencing diverse situations in different cultural manifestations, but also in terms of training their understanding of different varieties of the English language.

3.3 Analysing

After they have applied their knowledge comprehensively, the students are provided with opportunities to analyse cases and situations to empower themselves further within the four pillars of competencies. In the field of time management on this level of complexity, on the one hand given solution approaches to situations in which prioritisation and organisational planning are required and on the other hand personal experiences with solution strategies concerning planning and prioritising are examined. Exploration is also conducted in the competency field of *possibility* when analysing options of organisational actions, thereby similarly working on choice of register, context, and code in foreign language use. Furthermore, authentic parts of conversations – also difficult ones – are investigated in terms of revealing underlying structures and problems within speech acts according to known models. Finally, analysis is applied to the competency field of *demand* concerning appropriateness and norms when identifying value concepts of different cultures in diverse business settings and situations based on written case studies or audio-visual material to train not only reading but also integrated listening comprehension skills.

The results of analysis can be introduced in written form of an analytical essay in which linguistic mastery can be proven as well. Alternatively, results can be presented orally, thus showing oral abilities to professionally discuss interpretational approaches.

3.4 Evaluating

The analytical findings in all competency fields are then evaluated as options for actions concerning *knowledge* or *possibility*. This includes individual reflection as well as peer-to-peer feedback on written and oral language use and additionally discussing options for organisational actions. When assessing individual value concepts and time management approaches in the competency field of *desire*, students are instructed to create self-reflection portfolios on various occasions to reveal personal advancement and empowerment in their course of study. Moreover, reflection essays gauge culture norms in the field of *demand* concerning appropriateness and norms, thereby discussing limits, restrictions, and chances of theoretical models combined with analysis and personal experience, which could

furthermore lead to supplementary development of existing models on intercultural communication. Additionally, the evaluation can be accomplished in the form of an oral panel debate, thus giving students not only the chance to perform as participants in the panel, but also as audience, giving informed feedback on oral performance as well as on analysis and judgement.

3.5 Deciding and Justifying

Finally, students are consequently empowered to thoroughly decide how to act and react in various intercultural business situations in all the four pillars of competency, thereby providing informed justification for their choice from integrated professional, organisation, individual, and intercultural perspectives. This leads to a comprehensive, contextualised acquisition of competencies not only in the linguistic field of traditional Business English, but also in holistic qualification and expansion of intercultural, value-based, and individualised skills.

4. Evaluation of Learning Objectives – A Survey

From March 2019 to March 2022, the students of the master's degree programme Systems Engineering have been questioned in a survey designed to evaluate the learning objectives and didactic concept presented in this paper. Questions included self-assessment (interpersonal and social skills, English language skills, learning success) and evaluation (importance of various competencies for professional life, teaching methods) with rating scales (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree or from 1 = unimportant to 5 = very important) as well as an open question to define intercultural competence. The survey was circled at the beginning and at the end of the semester to be able to analyse differences in evaluation and growth of competencies. All in all, the findings are based on 243 questionnaires that were completed; the most striking results shall be described here. The diagrams show the findings separately before and during the corona pandemics, which allows an insight into changes in evaluation brought about by online teaching formats.

The results have shown that there was a significant change concerning the definition of intercultural communication between the questionnaires completed at the beginning of the semester and those completed at the end of the semester. Whereas in the answers given at the beginning of the semester, a normative understanding of intercultural competence was often revealed (knowledge about different cultures, knowledge of norms and values, correct behaviour), the answers given at the end of the semester revealed a more complex understanding. Aspects like awareness, toleration of ambiguity, self-reflection, empathy, orientation or shaping encounters were predominantly listed. This shows a changed perception of what intercultural competence implies.

The question on evaluation of general importance of interpersonal competencies for professional life (communication skills, non-verbal communication, emotional intelligence, ability to work in a team, flexibility, negotiation skills, problem-solving skills, time-management skills, leadership skills, and intercultural competence) supports this finding, as emotional competence and flexibility (cf. fig 1 and 2) have been the only competences whose importance has increased at the end of the semester compared to the beginning:
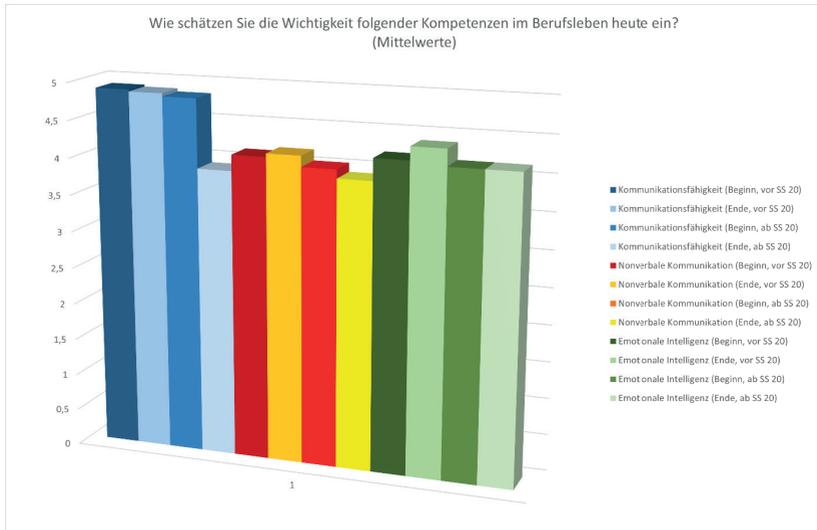
Wie schätzen Sie die Wichtigkeit folgender Kompetenzen im Berufsleben heute ein?
(Mittelwerte)

- Kommunikationsfähigkeit (Beginn, vor SS 20)
- Kommunikationsfähigkeit (Ende, vor SS 20)
- Kommunikationsfähigkeit (Beginn, ab SS 20)
- Kommunikationsfähigkeit (Ende, ab SS 20)
- Nonverbale Kommunikation (Beginn, vor SS 20)
- Nonverbale Kommunikation (Ende, vor SS 20)
- Nonverbale Kommunikation (Beginn, ab SS 20)
- Nonverbale Kommunikation (Ende, ab SS 20)
- Emotionale Intelligenz (Beginn, vor SS 20)
- Emotionale Intelligenz (Ende, vor SS 20)
- Emotionale Intelligenz (Beginn, ab SS 20)
- Emotionale Intelligenz (Ende, ab SS 20)

Fig. 1: Evaluation of importance of competences for professional life – part 1

It is striking that the communicative competence has lost considerably in importance during the pandemics (fig. 1), whereas competences as flexibility (fig. 2) and time management skills (fig. 3) have gained importance during corona in comparison to the time before corona.
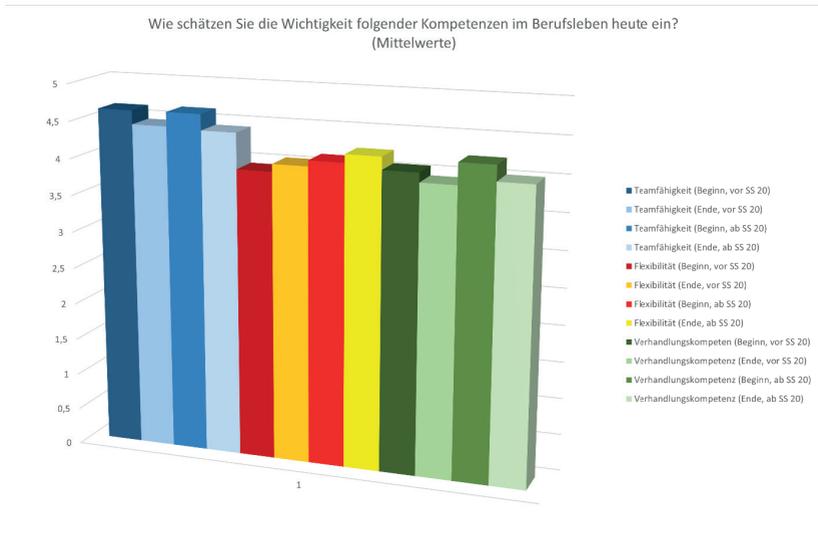
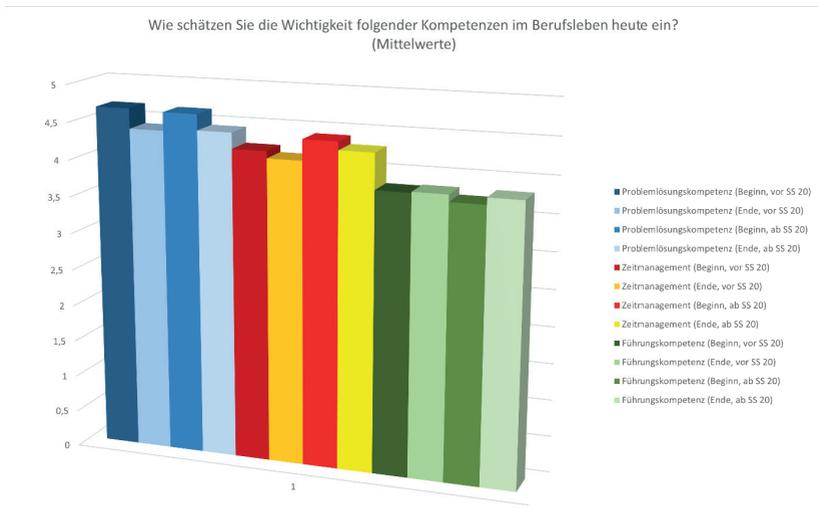Fig. 2: Evaluation of importance of competences for professional life – part 2

Fig. 3: Evaluation of importance of competences for professional life – part 3

From the questions concerning self-assessment of the interpersonal and social skills, the ability to professionally and competently communicate with people in business life (fig. 4) showed a considerable increase from the beginning to the end of the semester.
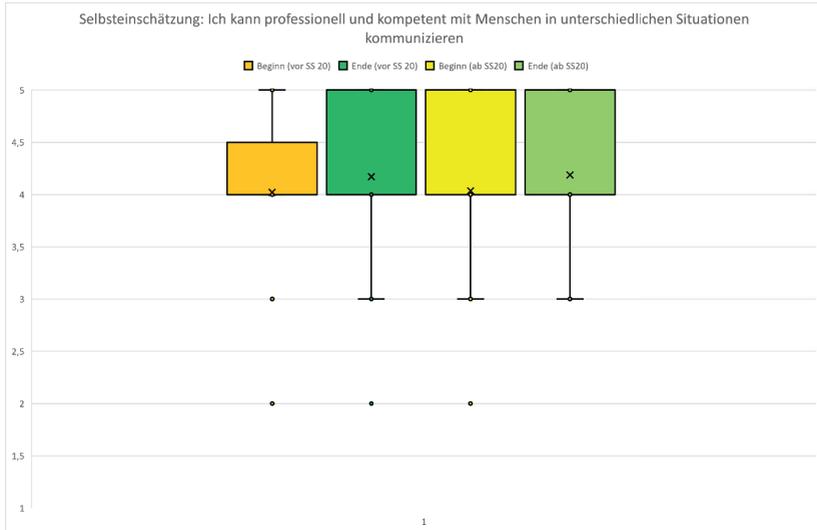

Fig. 4: Ability to professionally and competently communicate with people in business life

The ability to listen effectively (fig. 5) rose in on-site teaching formats but decreased in online teaching settings:
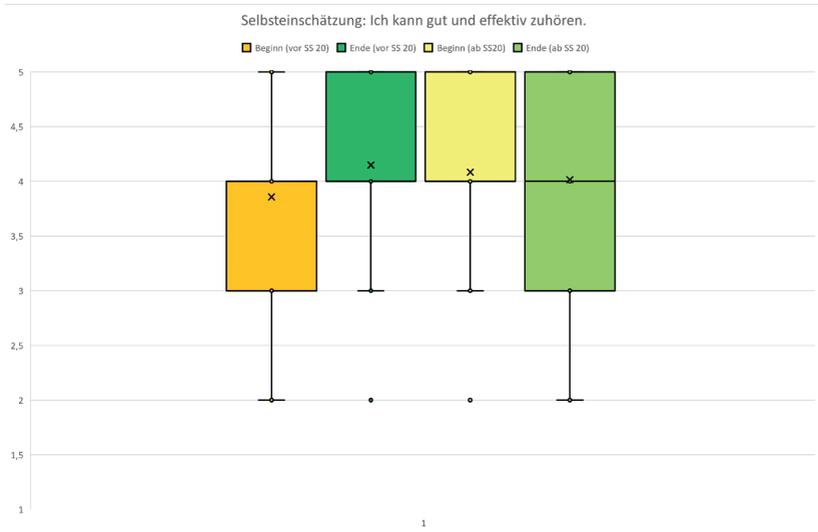
Fig. 5: Ability to listen effectively

Flexibility, in contrast, has gained during the pandemics (fig. 6):

Fig. 6: Ability to flexibly react to changing requirements in cooperating with other people

The competence to manage complexity has grown throughout the whole period of the survey (fig. 7):

Fig. 7: Ability to precisely use knowledge and experience to professionally encounter complex challenges

The ability to culturally question and understand unexpected behaviour, an indicator of tolerance of ambiguity as an important key to intercultural competence, rose throughout the whole period of the survey (fig. 8):
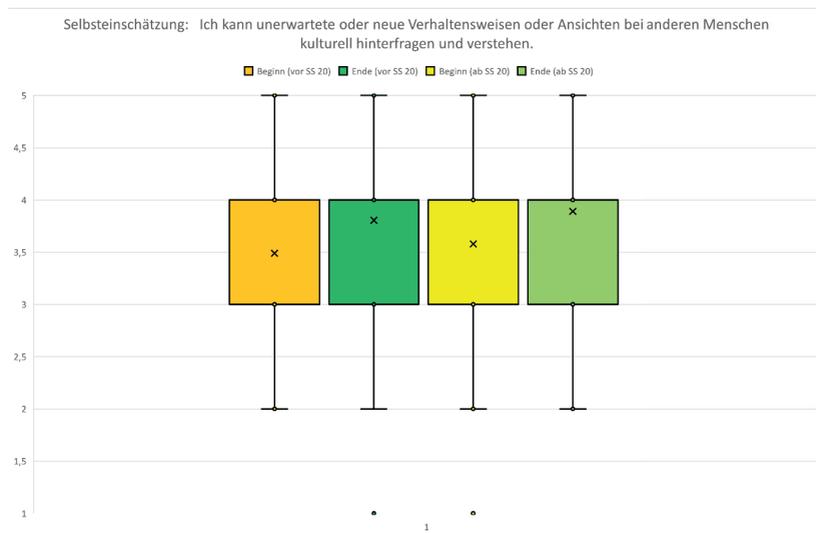
Fig. 8: Ability to culturally question and understand unexpected or new behaviour and perspective within other people

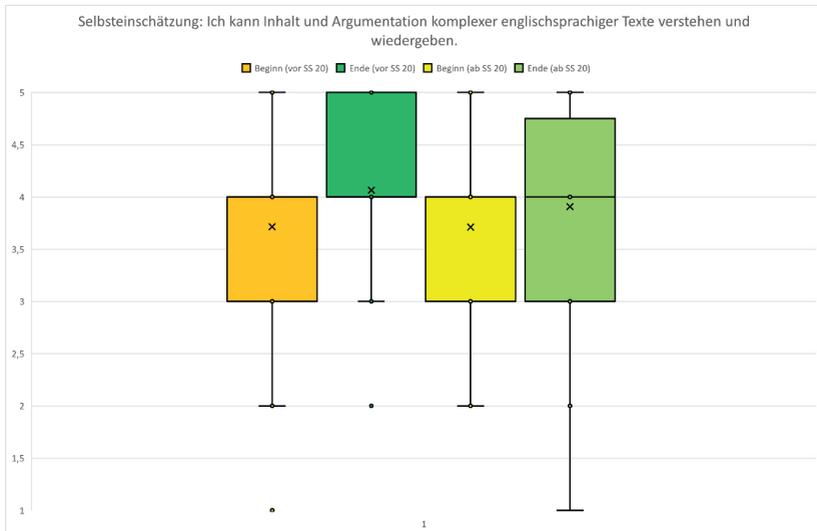From the questions concerning self-assessment of English language skills, the ability to understand content and argumentation of complex English texts (fig. 9) and the ability to competently communicate in English with people in professional life (fig. 10) showed a considerable increase from the beginning to the end of the semester. Here again, the gain in competence was higher in times of on-site teaching formats.

Selbsteinschätzung: Ich kann Inhalt und Argumentation komplexer englischsprachiger Texte verstehen und wiedergeben.

Fig. 9: Ability to understand content and argumentation of complex English texts

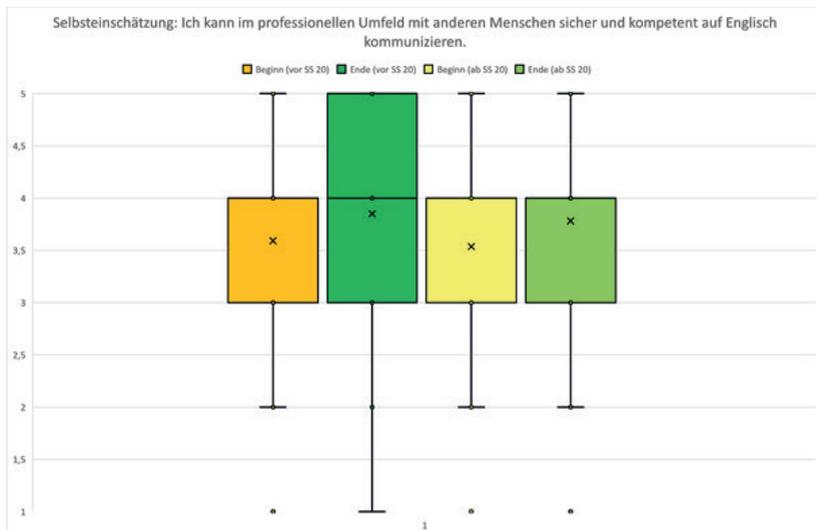Selbsteinschätzung: Ich kann im professionellen Umfeld mit anderen Menschen sicher und kompetent auf Englisch kommunizieren.

Fig. 10: Ability to competently communicate in English with people in professional life

The writing competence also grew considerably throughout the whole period of the survey (fig. 11):

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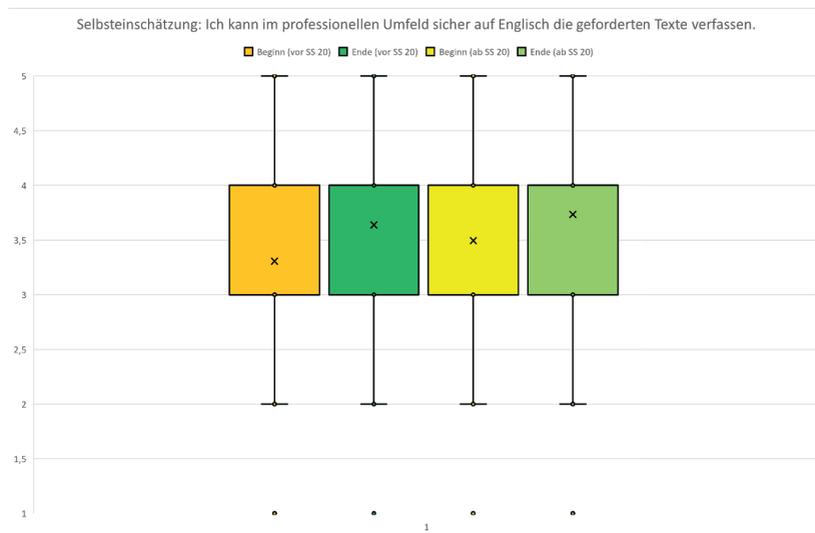
Fig. 11: Ability to confidently write English texts in professional settings

In terms of the evaluation of teaching methods concerning the gain of intercultural competence, role plays (fig. 12), in-class discussions (fig. 13), and analysis of case studies/critical incidents (fig. 14) gained considerably from beginning to end of the semester. These methods all operate on the levels "analysing", "evaluating", "deciding", and "justifying" of table 1 and have a positive influence on gain of competence independent of teaching format (on-site or online).
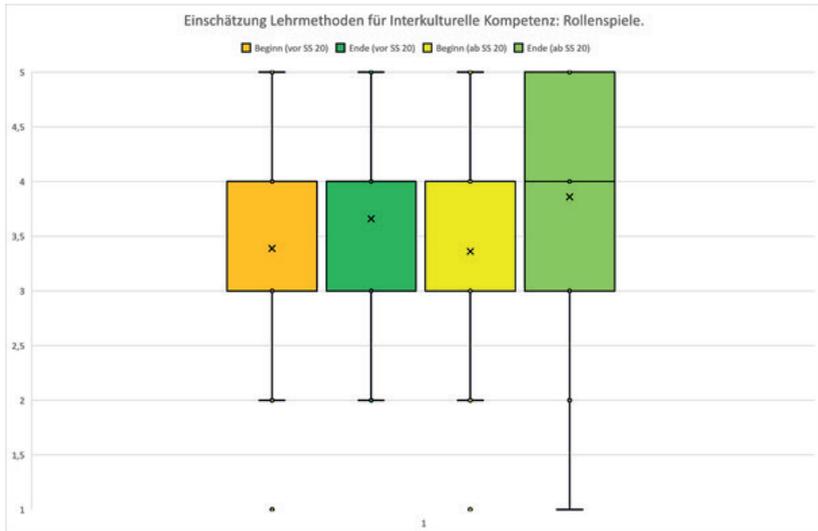
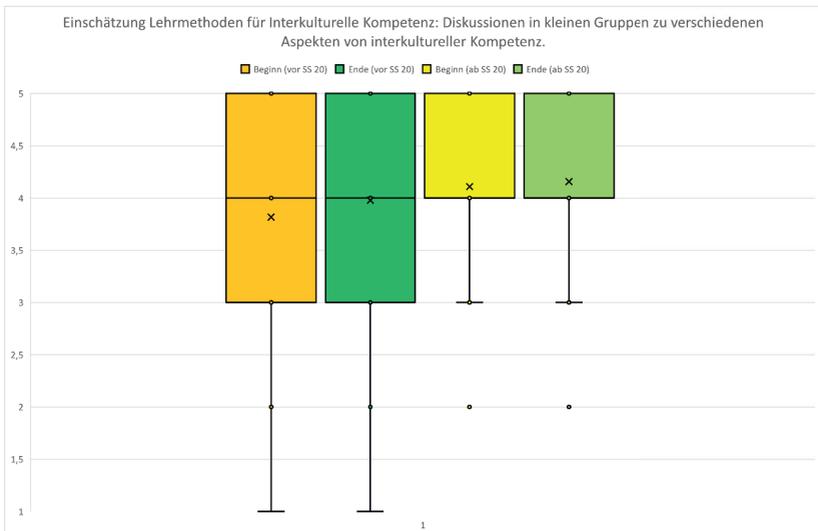Fig. 12: Assessment of teaching methods to gain intercultural competence: role plays

Fig. 13: Assessment of teaching methods to gain intercultural competence: in-class discussions
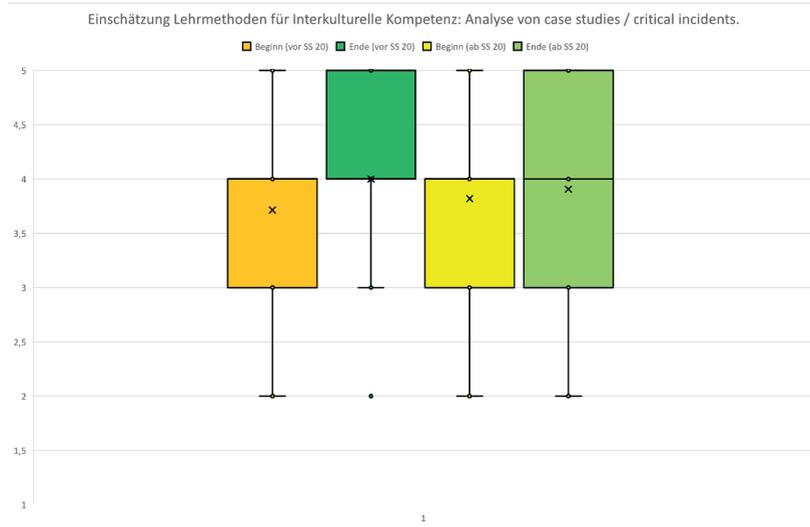
Fig. 14: Assessment of teaching methods to gain intercultural competence: analysis of case studies/ critical incidents

Finally, the individual learning success and gain of competence at the end of the semester were evaluated as overall satisfying (fig. 15 and fig. 16) with a slightly negative tendency in online teaching formats.
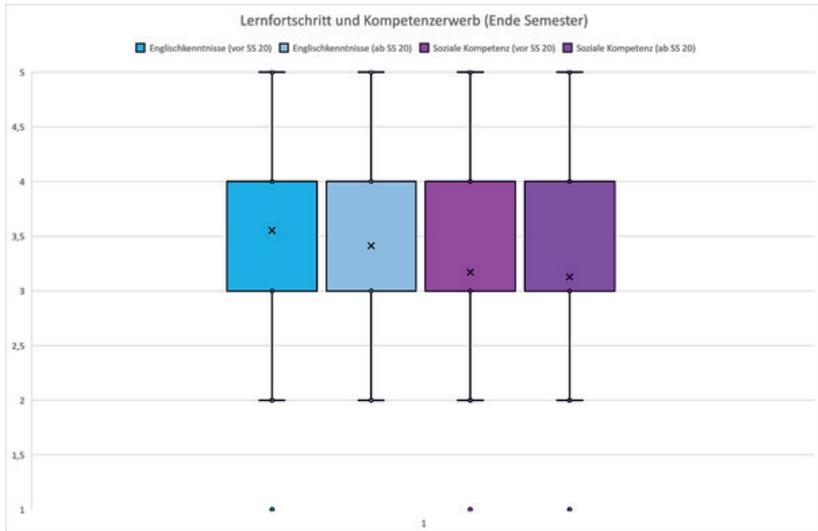
Fig. 15: Individual learning success and gain of competence (end of semester) – part 1
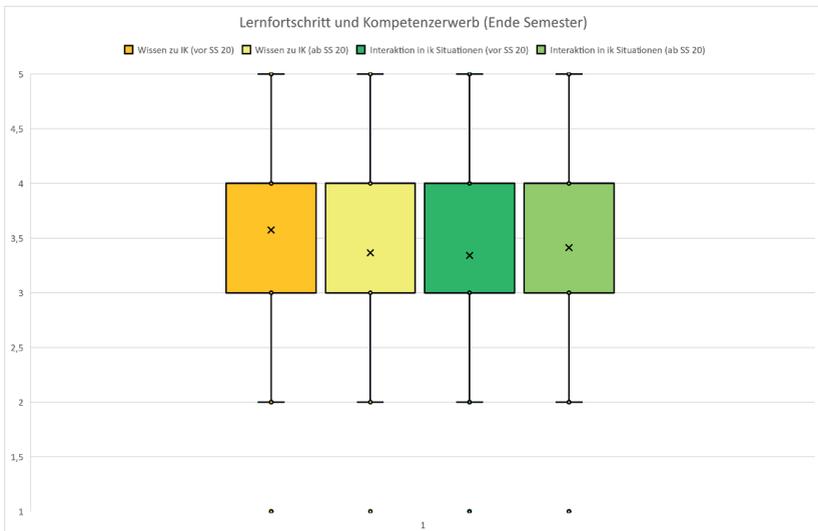

Fig. 16: Individual learning success and gain of competence (end of semester) – part 2

5. Outlook

The outlined model of a comprehensive and integrated language programme following the facets of competencies clearly illustrates a new and enhanced complexity of the widely used terms "competency" and "skills orientation" in university education, which have become common in the debate since the Bologna reform. Instead of aiming too narrowly at teaching appropriate skills in line with market requirements, university education should adopt a sustainable, comprehensive, and interdisciplinary approach to provide students with individualised, interpersonal, and intercultural education (cf. Macke et al. 2016: 72). The survey has shown that the concept of that comprehensive and integrated language programme produces the intended outcome. In our *VUCA* world that is characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity,[3] it is essential to design comprehensive education programmes that outpace the idea of formation for a seemingly well-known market as digitisation, globalisation, and acceleration are the driving forces of today's and tomorrow's changing society.

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[3] The acronym VUCA was originally introduced in the 1990s in the US military discourse to describe the new multilateral world after the Cold War and emphasised yet unknown methods of warfare (cf. Gläser 2018).

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