

## **EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation 2022**

### **Reflective Portfolio by Hana Svetin**

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#### *Reflective Essay*

I've been fascinated with interculturalism and travelling from a very young age. I think it primarily stems from experiencing different nationalities even before I had completed my first birthday. My grandfather is Croatian and has in his lifetime experienced many national identities: Italian, Croatian, Yugoslavian and Slovenian. After he married my Slovenian grandmother, they didn't settle in Slovenia but lived half of the time in Croatia and half of the time in Slovenia, continuing to do so even now. To me, he is the example of what it *truly* means to be intercultural, to express multiple intercultural identities in the sense of not only experiencing other cultures, but embodying parts of them as well. My international experiences are different, as I've lived in Slovenia my whole life and have come in touch with other nationalities and cultures only for a shorter period of time. I cannot speak about what it means to truly live through international shifts or about interculturalism existing as part of my identity. What I can speak about, though, are the deeply meaningful international experiences I've had so far, everything they taught me, and the ones I'm looking forward to being part of in the future. More specifically, I will try to connect these experiences, especially through the perspective of native and foreign languages, with the four main goals of EUCI: expressing one's full understanding of what it means to reflect on intercultural, intersectoral and challenge-based activities.

My parents told me I could speak before I even understood what I was saying, which was apparent on our international travels. I'd hear a person speak in their native tongue and repeat what they said, word for word, not knowing what the meaning of the sentence was. That seemed to amuse my parents and their encouragement motivated me to learn different languages. Luckily, the Slovenian school system places great importance on learning foreign languages. Throughout my school years I was able to take Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch, and English classes, and I am far from being alone in doing so. A 2019 Eurostat study has shown that the share of students in Slovenia who learn two or more foreign languages is amongst the highest in the EU, coming in at about 90 %, with the EU average being about 30 % of students. Learning foreign languages also strengthened my positive attitude toward different cultures, which further sparked my interest in language learning and its relation to identity from an academic point of view. Foreign language learning didn't just open career opportunities for me and deepen my academic development, it also found its way into my personal sphere of being.

I've found it easier to express myself in English than in Slovenian in some cases, e.g. through poetry. I believe I am not alone in this – the themes in many novels revolve around self-expression on certain emotionally profound topics through different mediums, and one can think of different languages in a similar way. One of many examples of this is Anne Michaels' novel *Fugitive Pieces*, where she so beautifully shows the importance of different languages for shaping one's identity, especially when dealing with emotionally intense experiences in one's life. Studies have shown that foreign language processing somewhat bypasses automatic stages of emotional processing, which means it's easier to complete cognitive tasks with

emotional buffers in a foreign language, whereas emotional stimuli in a native language often hinder cognitive processing. This should come as no surprise, though, as native languages are acquired in emotionally rich contexts, whereas foreign languages are typically acquired in emotionally neutral academic environments (Ivaz et. al, 2016). To sum up, when one deals with emotionally intense stimuli by thinking or expressing oneself in a foreign language, a sort of an emotional distance is evoked, which aids the cognitive processing of psychologically difficult experiences. Foreign languages can therefore be a personal tool for processing heavy emotions, surpassing their power of opening doors in academic environments.

As mentioned, these early interactions with foreign languages have also encouraged me to try and understand the interesting relationship between language and identity from an academic point of view. Many researchers have studied the relationship between language and identity, and some have even proposed the two of them being a single entity or giving language the crucial role of 'a mediating tool for constructing and deconstructing individual and social identities' (Barnawi, 2009, p. 66). Language isn't just an integral part of one's individual identity, it also represents a key element to our collective, national, and cultural identities. It also offers insight into personality, an integral part of individual identity, through what is called a lexical hypothesis. I've encountered this hypothesis during my psychology studies and learned that it is based on the idea that language allows humans to describe specific ways in which we differ (or are alike). Because of this idea many psychologists believe that we can describe personality through descriptors (words) that are encoded into a specific culture's language (Cutler & Condon, 2022). I believe language in psychology, such as its place in the lexical hypothesis, has great transdisciplinary value, which surpasses purely academic spheres. It can be seen in the way people within and across cultures communicate and shape their own thoughts, even. So, an example of intrapersonal effects of using different languages would be my process of writing poetry in English versus Slovene. I've found it easier to simultaneously focus on the structure, rhyming and the story itself while writing an emotionally intense poem in English, however, when doing so in Slovene, the emotionally charged story takes center stage, making it more difficult for me to focus on the structure and rhythmic qualities of the poem, resulting in a much more formless poem. The effects language has on identity and expression can be seen on an interpersonal level, too. One example being that languages differ in the relative size and character of their affective lexicon, such that the number of words available to describe emotions can differ greatly between languages (Robinson & Altarriba, 2014). Hence, languages shape the way we think and studies have shown that changing how people talk changes how they think and perceive the world around them (Boroditsky, 2011).

Out of all identities a person constructs (e.g. individual, social, national), *cultural* is the one that divides different cultural groups of people and in that sense also connects its members (e.g. Lee, 2002). One of the main ways in which it does so is through language – the speakers must learn how to communicate with each other to share ideas in the broadest sense of the word. On the other hand, one could argue a different, *intercultural identity*, is strengthened using many languages and not just the mother tongue, such as is the *European identity*. European identity isn't one through which national borders help us define ourselves by separating our fellow citizens from the *others* (a common way to develop cultural identity is by identifying yourself as part of a group that is different from some 'other' group). Indeed, it is the identification *across* borders and nationalities that forges such an identity. For a European identity to develop one must routinely engage in interaction with people from different societies, partake in European international projects and often speak a second, third or fourth language for operating successfully in such an environment.

I believe I've strengthened my European identity through Erasmus+ short term exchanges I was part of. The time spent during a short-term exchange is partly structured, especially during activities led by the school, and partly unstructured, as the students spend most of their time in the company of their peers and host families. A typical day for me consisted of learning about cultural specifics of the host country, e.g. the way their school system works and sitting through some of their classes, sightseeing and going on guided tours, and spending time with my exchange buddy and their family or friends. The amount of knowledge I gained through these unstructured activities was immeasurable. I was able to compare and reflect on the differences and similarities between my own country and the host country, such as their food culture, the importance of religion, socioeconomic differences in the city's inhabitants, school values, and the way of life itself. Every time I returned home, I had a new appreciation of my own culture and the ways of living I was used to. I find this interesting, because I wouldn't identify myself as particularly patriotic, nor unpatriotic for that matter, mostly ambivalent in regard to my cultural identity. I am critical towards some aspects of Slovenian culture (at least as I perceive it) and welcoming towards others. However, these exchanges have, somewhat interestingly, strengthened my cultural identity. Language being on the forefront yet again – during my stay in different countries, I've always felt a lingering sensation every time I spoke in my native language, as if I'm performing something special, something that's only shared by some and not understood by all. A sort of a safe harbor I can always return to, when dealing with uncontrollable changes and finding myself in unfamiliar environments. Indeed, out of all the elements of Slovenia and Slovenian culture, Slovenian language is where I feel most at home. Alas, Heidegger's idea rings true: *language is the house of being*.

Moving on to slightly more concrete actualizations of how foreign languages have opened a universe of possibilities for me and how they coincide with the main goals of EUCI. When speaking of overcoming challenges, international student exchanges come to mind. I believe one's active participation in these exchanges has the potential to address local and global issues simultaneously and interchangeably. Some examples include overcoming stereotypes and prejudice, welcoming interpersonal differences, learning about life in different cultural environments and having a strengthened sense of one's own cultural or national identity. I believe this is especially true for exchanges done in elementary school or high school, as they focus on the implicit intercultural connectedness, and not so much on the structured academic activities that are more prevalent during university Erasmus+ exchanges. However, the latter do add an element of their own: university exchanges allow the student to grow academically and career-wise, which is also an important part of one's identity. For me personally, the option of studying abroad has been an important motivator during my studies at home, as I've always wanted to take part in a university exchange. My motives weren't primarily gaining intercultural experiences, but first and foremost being able to take classes on psychology topics that interest me the most but aren't offered in Slovenia. International environments and alliances therefore aren't beneficial merely for the abstract goals for one's development, such as being inclusive, respectful, and educated about other cultures to name a few, they also offer more practical knowledge as well. I believe EUCI teaches both, the intangible skills for personal growth, as well as practical knowledge needed to succeed in an international environment. During our lessons we shared our thoughts and ideas on current problems, offering concrete examples of ways in which we're trying to overcome certain barriers of various sources. I believe we learned more about different ways in which one can get involved with local or global communities, as

well as growing an appreciation for such a diverse group of people, where all are heard, respected, and celebrated.

If I were to take a bottom-up approach regarding international challenges, my role as a tutor for exchange students comes to mind. I feel a great sense of belonging to an international environment that is being co-created with all international students I interact with, all whilst anchoring in my own national identity. Offering help and asking myself 'What does Slovenia have to offer to international students?' instills a refreshing mindset from a native Slovenian's perspective. It starts as a local challenge – how can we make our faculty as kind and open to foreign students as possible? – and has local, as well as global impact. I believe the tutoring system helps strengthen the international relationships between academic institutions. In doing so it sets an example for openness and acceptance to other (local or global) institutions, organizations, and individuals, who may sometimes show reserve to people from different nationalities.

Furthermore, encouraging students and others to discover the benefits of identifying with multiple cultures and thus finding the possibilities of contributing to a wider community could lead to a higher sense of intercultural identity, such as European identity, without endangering one's sense of national identity. A perfect example of this would be the inclusive space provided by EUCI. Another EUTOPIA-driven activity that comes to mind is the Eutopia Student Think Tank (EUSTT). I've published a blog post on [The Six Thinking Hats method](#), and another contribution on language and cultural identity that will hopefully be published soon. I have included some ideas from the latter in this essay, because the main theme fits nicely in my reflection on internationalization. Academic and non-academic writing is something that has been very dear to me, as I feel like I can express myself best through writing. In the academic writing I've done so far, I have always included a critical stance towards the topic at hand. For an example, in my piece about work from home (available in Slovenian, [here](#)), I emphasized how great a negative effect working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic has had on women in particular, who took on the majority of housework and child-care, deepening gender inequalities in the workplace (e.g. European Commission, 2021). I see EUSTT as a space where such critical questions posed in authors' contributions aren't just a side note or a paragraph to include, but the main theme itself. Platforms such as these encourage critical thought, even (or especially) when it comes to being critical of the systems that are currently in place. I believe that is a very healthy, mature mindset to have and it will surely result in student-driven solutions for existing problems in the future.

Considering most, if not all definitions of cultural identity pose language as one of the key elements for internalizing one's cultural beliefs, values, norms, habits and customs (e.g. Lee, 2002), learning to speak in other tongues could be connected to going beyond one's national identity (presuming there is only one dominant language spoken in said nation). In doing so it doesn't necessarily replace the former identity but adds a new dimension to the *self*. I've found that, for me, learning foreign languages opened numerous possibilities for engaging in international activities. The EUTOPIA Alliance has created a community of like-minded people who offer a safe and inclusive space for discussing current practices and future endeavors that could benefit a wider group of people from different nationalities, backgrounds, and cultures. In moving forward, I hope to further deepen this international-oriented mentality in my academic and personal development.

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*\*some parts of the essay are transcribed from my upcoming publication on language and identity, which will be published on Eutopia Student Think Tank (EUSTT) sometime in 2022/2023.*

## *Summary Essay*

### **Introduction**

With this summary essay I will try to demonstrate that I have successfully achieved all four of the learning outcomes: reflective, intercultural, intersectoral and challenge based. I will do so by summarizing the main points I made in my reflective essay.

### **Reflective**

Reflecting was an integral part of all four learning outcomes and can be seen through the depiction of the experiences I mention in the essay. Throughout the essay I was referencing my personal experiences, while also including academic viewpoints on specific topics, for example academic articles on language and cultural identity. I also tried to support my ideas with data provided by the European Union, so as to make my opinion more relevant and situated in a broader thinking system. Besides including academic references, I supported my arguments with non-academic references as well. This way I tried to articulate my thinking with the help of other resources, which served to deepen my own opinion or impression. In doing so, my subjective experiences stand stronger, and I have shown the ability to not only list my previous and future experiences and knowledge gained in an international environment, but also critically evaluate the experience from various points of view. In the essay, I wrote about my international exchanges, my relationship with foreign languages and its manifestations, academic and non-academic writing, and the ways in which all these factors contribute to my international identity.

### **Intercultural**

I can hardly imagine a life without being in contact with different nations and cultures in some way. I have been lucky enough to realize how meaningful and powerful language learning is very early on in my life, which gave me an appreciation and an affinity for international experiences. During my elementary and high school education I was able to take part in four short term exchanges in Turkey, Romania, and Italy. This was a terrific opportunity for me to develop interpersonal skills and appreciate differences between cultures and people in general. I believe the knowledge and skills obtained during these international experiences are infinite for breaking down stereotypes, discrimination and simply growing an appreciation for foreign cultures as well as strengthening your own. Having been in contact with many different languages has affected the way I communicate my thoughts and express my emotions as well, as I sometimes find it easier to do so in English than in my native Slovene language. I can only hope I'll be able to work in the international environment in the future as well, as I can hardly imagine something more fulfilling than being able to co-create an inclusive and accepting environment, where differences are celebrated and not frowned upon. The one thing I look forward to in the near future the most is my Erasmus+ exchange in the Netherlands, where I'll be able to connect with international students from Europe and elsewhere and discuss Psychology-related topics that motivate me in my studies. Through this I will continue building a new, international-academic sphere of my being, with its beginnings firmly rooted in Eutopia activities.

### **Intersectoral**

One of the ways through which I addressed being intersectoral was done in a direct manner, in my *Language and cultural identity* blog post for EUSTT. In the contribution, parts of which I

included in my reflective essay, I write about the relationship between language, cultural and international identity. I believe this topic is a great example of transdisciplinarity because the connection between language and identity couldn't be made without integrating multiple disciplines: social psychology, anthropology, psychology of personality, philosophy and sociology. I further develop my arguments with my own personal experience and other non-academic arguments, such as how language and identity are rooted in fiction novels.

Most of my transdisciplinary knowledge is currently tied to the academic sphere. In the future I am most excited about spending a semester abroad, where I'll be deepening my psychology knowledge in an international environment. However, I believe the international short-term exchanges done in elementary school and high school have interdisciplinary value outside the academic context as well. The exchanges allowed me to strengthen my interpersonal and language skills and have given me an opportunity to develop independence while travelling. Even though these skills are less explicit, they are of no less importance. I have since been able to confidently plan international travels and travel on my own. On a more professional level they have given me an insight into how exchanges are organized. I find this very valuable for my future career opportunities, where organizational skills will be needed.

### **Challenge based**

In the essay I touch on local and global challenges, using both the bottom-up and top-down approach to understanding their international value. The school exchanges are a good example for the top-down approach, as they're by nature international, however, they manage to address local and global issues simultaneously. An example of this could be raising awareness on stereotypes and overcoming them. Through the exchange teens learn about interpersonal relationships and conflict solving in situations where our point of view is different from another's. This can be useful for interacting with people whose values differ strongly from ours, which can be applied to an intercultural as well as a more local environment.

Another example of addressing global challenges through a local community is my involvement in tutoring exchange students. The tutoring system strengthens the international relationships between academic institutions, but more importantly makes foreign students feel welcome and accepted. Moving to a foreign country is surely an exciting time, but can also bring unpleasant feelings, such as feeling isolated, helpless, and oftentimes overwhelmed. I believe being a tutor doesn't only strengthen international relationships between academic institutions, but also helps to create an inclusive, welcoming space where everybody feels appreciated and safe.

### **Conclusion**

I took part in EUCI not really knowing what to expect – the learning outcomes seem very abstract without applying your own experiences and knowledge to them. However, through our seminars I have been able to contextualize my past and future international experiences. I've learned that it isn't important how many international experiences one has had if they aren't able to reflect on them. And this is the true value of EUCI: being able to think about personal experiences that have had some type of international impact, and truly recognizing their meaning for you personally and for the local/global community as well. The EUTOPIA Alliance is creating a space that is student-empowering, giving us, the students, a platform for making local and global changes in relevant challenges. Raising awareness about internationalization and encouraging reflection is the first step in doing so. Furthermore, this

experience has reinforced my wish to work in an international setting, whether it be in academia or outside it.