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## Hungarian EFL Students' Perspectives on Global Competence Development in a Thematic Language Course

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### Abstract

In today's increasingly complex world, education must equip students to become engaged, globally competent citizens, who can solve both local and global issues and are ready to face the challenges of the 21st century. The goal of global competence is to address these demands by strengthening the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes: a globally competent student can examine issues of global significance, understand other people's perspectives, engage in appropriate and effective interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds, and act for collective well-being and sustainable development. In this framework, this case study aims to explore how a thematic language development seminar focussing on global content can contribute to developing second-year EFL students' global competence and its perceived effectiveness. One group of students (N=18) from a prestigious Hungarian university was involved in the study, instructed by the first author. Data was collected over the course of the Spring 2023 semester from multiple data sources: student reflections after each thematic lesson, a beginning-of-the-term feedback sheet, an end-of-the-term feedback sheet, weekly student reflections, observation notes (by the second author) and reflective journals (by the first author). The findings emerging from this qualitative inquiry suggest that the students were satisfied with the course overall and could effectively gauge which global and language skills they developed during the course. These findings imply that designing courses with dual aims is both feasible and worthwhile, and with the help of regular reflection exercises, the students can be made aware of the development of their skills, leading to increased global awareness and satisfaction with the course.

**Keywords/key phrases:** global citizenship, global competence, case study, English as a foreign language, teacher education

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## 1. Introduction

In this era of global interconnectedness and rapid change, education faces the challenge of equipping students to navigate complex local and global issues while readying them for the demands of an ever-changing job market (UNESCO, 2016). This imperative has brought the concept of global competence to the forefront of educational discourse. Global competence encompasses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for students to examine global issues, understand diverse perspectives, interact effectively across cultures, and act for collective well-being and sustainable development (OECD, 2018).

Despite the efforts of several organisations (OECD, UNESCO, Global Education Network Europe), the implementation of global education and thus the development of global competence is still in its rudimentary stages in several countries. The challenges with implementation are further amplified in contexts where global education is only marginally present in formal curricula and Hungary, the focus of this study, currently lacks an “accredited formal global education curriculum” (CONCORD, 2018, p. 72). Furthermore, the prevailing educational culture in Hungary is characterised by a misconception that political discourse should be excluded from academic settings (Hunyadi & Wessenauer, 2016). Nevertheless, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study on global competence (OECD, 2020) corroborated that Hungary faces significant challenges in integrating global dimensions into its education system: Fifteen-year-old students demonstrated low proficiency in questions examining global, local, and intercultural issues, and scored significantly below the OECD average in areas assessing attitudes towards immigrants and perceptions of agency regarding global issues.

In this context, it is paramount to explore pedagogical strategies that enable teachers to successfully develop their students’ global competence, thereby preparing them for real-world scenarios. This study investigates the potential of integrating global content into language education to develop global competence among university students. Specifically, it examines a thematic language development seminar at a prestigious Hungarian university, employing a case study design, to explore its effectiveness in enhancing students’ global competence alongside their language skills from the students’ perspectives.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Skills Needed for Thriving in a Globalised World

Due to the unpredictable nature of the job market, to make university studies relevant, university teachers must first develop their students’ work-related, cognitive, and transferable skills, enabling them to use these abilities across a variety of work environments; and second, they should encourage the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to face the challenges of our time (UNESCO, 2016). The recent emphasis on skill development became evident in the popularisation of the term “21st-century skills” and the European Commission’s (2022) declaration of 2023 as the European Year of Skills. There is currently no generally accepted comprehensive framework of the skills needed to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite the efforts of many authors and institutions (Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills - Griffin & Care, 2015; Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2015), and given the unpredictability of the future and the length of a century, developing such a framework could be in vain. A more pragmatic approach focuses on present-day employer expectations and current issues to address near-future challenges effectively. For instance, the

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World Economic Forum (2020) identified eight essential characteristics of educational experiences and content that might identify high-quality learning throughout the Fourth Industrial Revolution, also known as **Education 4.0**:

- a) Global citizenship skills.
- b) Innovation and creativity skills.
- c) Technology skills.
- d) Interpersonal skills.
- e) Personalised and self-paced learning.
- f) Accessible and inclusive learning.
- g) Problem-based and collaborative learning.
- h) Lifelong and student-driven learning.

Considering these skills and characteristics can help tutors design more relevant and useful courses. Quality education in the first decades of the 21st century must “develop the skills, values and attitudes that enable citizens to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, make informed decisions, and respond to local and global challenges” (UNESCO, 2018, p. 1), according to the Fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4). Therefore, it is not surprising to find global citizenship skills at the top of this list. What is meant by global citizenship education and what skills are needed for being a global citizen are discussed in the following section.

## 2.2. Global Citizenship Education and Global Competence

**Global education**, an umbrella term which encompasses human rights education, education for sustainable development and global citizenship education, is defined by GENE as “education that enables people to reflect critically on the world and their place in it; to open their eyes, hearts and minds to the reality of the world at local and global level” (2022, p. 3). Global education has been on the agenda in Europe since the 1980s, and it has gained momentum in several waves, marked by numerous declarations and policy documents.

The United Nations made the development of global citizens one of its goals worldwide (UNESCO, 2014), marking the beginning of a new chapter in the promotion of global education. UNESCO (2014) created a complex educational framework called **Global Citizenship Education (GCED)**, which “aims to empower learners to engage and assume active roles, both locally and globally, to face and resolve global challenges and ultimately to become proactive contributors to a more just, peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable world” (p. 15). GCED has widely influenced educational systems all over the world, and the global perspective is markedly present in the core curriculum in many countries, with explicit goals.

The importance of GCED was further highlighted when in 2018, OECD PISA started measuring students’ **global competence**. A globally competent individual is seen as someone who has knowledge and understanding about the world and other cultures, has the skills to understand the world and take action, has the attitudes of openness and respect for people from different backgrounds, and who strives to value human dignity and diversity (OECD, 2018). Table 1 presents the components of global competence in more detail.

TABLE 1. THE COMPONENTS OF GLOBAL COMPETENCE

Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes and Values
Knowledge about environmental sustainability Knowledge of global issues Knowledge about culture and intercultural relations Knowledge about socio-economic development and interdependence Knowledge about global institutions, conflicts, and human rights	Reasoning with information Communicating effectively and respectfully Perspective-taking Conflict management and resolution Adaptability	Openness towards people from different backgrounds Respect Global mindedness Valuing human dignity and diversity

Source: based on OECD, 2018

The work to implement GCED in every country and at all levels of education is ongoing. GENE launched the European Declaration on Global Education to 2050 in 2022, providing evidence of continued dedication and further impetus for implementation.

### 2.3. Global Citizenship in English Language Teaching – Rationale and Empirical Background

The global dimension of education has long been present in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and will continue to have a place in it for several reasons. Given that English is the international language, a global lingua franca, the main aim of English language teaching (ELT) is to prepare students for international dialogue with people from different backgrounds (Lütge et al., 2023; Starkey, 2023). Also, the current teaching paradigm, post-communicative language teaching, favours task and content-based teaching, so it easily lends itself to the incorporation of global topics and social skills (Lightbown, 2013; Starkey, 2023). Moreover, students, in general, seem to be interested in global issues (Oxfam, 2018) and if they are engaged in what they are doing in class, they can be more easily motivated to learn the language (Basarir & Sari, 2022; Lightbown, 2013). In many countries, these global, local, and intercultural issues are in the curriculum, and students are expected to be able to form and express opinions about them in language proficiency examinations (Oxfam, 2018). Most importantly, while dealing with real-life issues, students can develop their transversal competencies and their four basic language skills at the same time (Starkey, 2023).

Even though the literature abounds in articles on the importance of implementing GCED into ELT (Babic et al., 2022; Lütge et al., 2023; Wu, 2019), and the analysis of global themes in ELT textbooks (Ait-Bouzid, 2020; Akbana & Yavuz, 2022), to date, a limited number of publications has presented classroom research and case studies. From such empirical studies (Basarir & Sari, 2022; Bayraktar Balkir 2021; Divéki, 2024; Gimenez et al., 2011; Nelson, 2015; Tekin, 2011) it becomes apparent that students, in general, acknowledge the importance of dealing with global topics in EFL classes and they mostly view their in-class treatment beneficial for developing their competencies. Many participating students in the aforementioned studies claimed that they had developed their knowledge and understanding of the issues and effectively developed their global skills. They also realised that they had developed their values and attitudes (i.e., cultivated their sense of identity, became more committed to social justice, learned to value and respect diversity and started to believe that they could contribute to a better world) while dealing with global content. It is, however, crucial

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to continue to write about good practices of implementing GCED to further inspire teachers to bring such issues into their classes. Furthermore, it is important to reveal the students' perspectives with the intention of further improving such courses to provide students with memorable and useful learning experiences.

### 3. Research Design and Methods

#### 3.1. Research Questions

The study aimed to explore the participants' perceptions of a thematic language development course focusing on global issues, and the knowledge, skills, and attitudes it developed. To guide the authors' enquiries, the following research questions were formulated:

1. In the participants' views, what aspects of their global competence did they develop in a thematic language development seminar?
2. In the participants' views, how did the course and the activities contribute to developing their global competence?
3. What are the students' views of a thematic language development seminar focusing on global issues?

#### 3.2. The Context of the Study

The study was conducted in Spring 2023 at a prestigious university in Budapest, in a thematic language development course run by the Department of Language Pedagogy. The course was instructed by the first author and observed by the second author. The course was both attended by students majoring in English studies and students attending the undivided teacher training programme in teaching English as a foreign language. The course is advertised for second-year students who have already passed a B2+ level proficiency exam. The instructors have considerable freedom in designing their course: while the main aim is developing students' overall language skills, the tutors may centre their lessons around any theme. The first author chose to design a course revolving around global issues to raise the students' social and global awareness while developing their language skills, mainly focusing on their speaking and vocabulary skills. The characteristics of Education 4.0 and the Global Competence framework also guided the instructor-researcher in the course design.

Given that the course was not completely new, the instructor already had a set of topics she intended to include, and worksheets for these topics had been created. During the first lesson though, the students themselves were also asked to choose the topics for discussion through a Mentimeter questionnaire. Overall, except for two (*bullying and free speech vs. hate speech*), they chose the same topics the students in the previous year had: *food waste, plastic waste, waste in the fashion industry, sex education, and gender equality*. The course was designed based on the flipped classroom principle: every week, the students received a worksheet on the learning management system (MS Teams) which they needed to fill in before the next lesson. These worksheets were based on videos and included comprehension and reflection questions, along with vocabulary development exercises and occasional research tasks. During the lessons, the questions from the worksheets were discussed in pairs or smaller groups, thereby maximising speaking time. After each lesson, the students were asked to write a reflection on MS Teams, in which they reflected on the tasks in the lesson and the handout and pondered

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whether these exercises had deepened their understanding of the topic or had prompted them to change their mindset about these issues.

Apart from these tasks, the students were required to create two presentations. One was a joint presentation with two other group members: the trios could choose any one of the topics at the beginning of the semester and prepare a 15-minute-long presentation on the issue at hand, to introduce the topic with statistics and shocking facts. To create effective presentations, the students had to work together, research the chosen topics, and synthesise their findings in a visually appealing short presentation. The other presentation was the product of a project they could either undertake alone or in smaller groups. Throughout the semester, the students were asked to perform an act of social responsibility, document it, and present what they did in the final lesson. The instructor posted a few suggestions about such activities on MS Teams, but the students were free to choose their projects. Some students did volunteer work, e.g., helped sick children study, while others did random acts of kindness, e.g., helped old neighbours garden, or picked up trash in the neighbourhood. Some, however, decided to raise awareness of pressing issues: one group put out free sanitary products in the ladies toilet at the department to raise awareness of period poverty, one set up a TikTok channel and created content about solutions to food waste, and one distributed flyers at the university about the issue of burnout. The purpose of this activity was to raise students' social awareness and make them more engaged global citizens.

The students were assessed based on the completion of these activities and the two vocabulary tests they took (mid-term test and end-term test). The course schedule, along with the handouts created for the course can be accessed via the first author's website (<https://shorturl.at/FFWD9>).

### **3.3. The Participants**

The participants of the study consisted of the students enrolled (N=18) in the instructor's thematic language development course in Spring 2023, including one male and 17 female students. The students were informed at the beginning of the course about data collection and their informed consent was sought for their assignments to be used for research purposes. To guarantee anonymous participation, everyone received a pseudonym (Student 1 – Student 18). After each direct quote or recurrent theme in the results section, the students are either marked as Student 1 or #1. The students had the opportunity to pull out of the study at any time. They were asked once again at the end of the course, and one student (Student 4) decided not to participate.

### **3.4. Tools and Methods of Data Collection**

Data was collected during the semester, in the 10 sessions the group spent together. At the beginning of the semester, the students filled in a (1) *beginning-of-the-term feedback sheet* centred around the following topics: their news consumption habits, their ideas of being a global citizen, and their perceived knowledge of the topics they had chosen for the course. Each week, part of their assignment was to write a (2) *reflection* on the activities they had done in class, including what they had learned about the issues and whether they had experienced any changes in their mindset. Each student had to submit seven reflections during the semester, nevertheless, some students missed a few and one student pulled out of the study. Overall, 82 entries were subjected to analysis. After each class, the instructor-researcher also wrote a (3) *reflective journal* entry (N=10), which documented the classes from the teacher's perspective and included notes about notable moments during the course and indications of problematic



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activities. To include another perspective, the co-author observed each class and created unstructured (4) *observation notes* (N=10), primarily focussing on student engagement and memorable moments. Finally, the students were asked to fill in an (5) *end-of-the-term feedback sheet*, enquiring into the skills they developed, the knowledge they acquired, and the activities they liked the most.

### **3.5. Methods of Data Analysis and the Quality Criteria of Research**

The open-ended questionnaire data, the after-class reflections, the observations, and the reflective journal entries were all analysed manually due to the low number of instances using the method of thematic content analysis (Xu & Zammit, 2020). Since the article presents a case study with a low number of participants, the results are not intended to be generalisable, only potentially transferable to other contexts.

The fact that the students participated in a research project led by their teacher may have resulted in some subjectivity (Mackey & Gass, 2005), and they may have given higher scores on the feedback form to please the first author. The Hawthorne effect (Mackey & Gass, 2005) could have also influenced the results: the fact that an observer was present may have positively affected the students' work ethics. Even if these issues are inherent to classroom research, the authors took the necessary precautions to mitigate these effects. The multiple instruments and perspectives allowed for triangulation, enhancing the credibility of the study (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The instructor-researcher's close familiarity with the group and the materials proved to be an asset as it provided a deep perspective into the case, nevertheless, the co-author's fresh perspective and objectivity also benefitted the data analysis process. To avoid researcher bias, the two authors' codes were compared and negotiated.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. The Students' Views on the Aspects of Global Competence Developed during the Course**

The beginning-of-the-term feedback via 5-point Likert scales and open-ended questions helped the researchers establish the students' profiles. They reported regular news consumption, primarily through social media and dedicated national and international news platforms. When asked *To what extent do you consider yourself up-to-date with current events in the world?* (1 = not at all; 5 = absolutely), they replied with a mean of 3.19 (SD = .75), and to the question *To what extent do you consider yourself up-to-date with current events in Hungary?*, with a mean of 3.44 (SD = 1.03), meaning that they are relatively up-to-date with what is happening around them but they are slightly more aware of the events in Hungary. Students generally identified as global citizens (M = 3.5, SD = .82), despite perceiving limited support from secondary education in this development (M = 2.5, SD = 1.03) (which underscored the findings of the PISA Study – OECD, 2020).

At the beginning of the semester, they were asked to assess their knowledge about the selected global issues for the course. Table 2 shows the mean values and standard deviations for both the global and local contexts.

TABLE 2. STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE OF THE SELECTED ISSUES (SELF-ASSESSMENT)

The issue	Global context		Local context	
	M	SD	M	SD
Gender Equality	4.19	.66	4.13	.96
Plastic Pollution	4.00	.63	3.31	.87
Bullying	3.94	.77	3.69	1.01
Food Waste	3.81	.83	3.44	1.03
Sex Education	3.69	0.79	3.69	1.01
Waste in the Fashion Industry	3.69	1.08	3.00	1.10
Hate Speech and Censorship	3.38	.81	3.94	.99

Source: own calculations

Given the low number of participants, drawing statistical comparisons from this data might not be particularly fruitful; nevertheless, it becomes apparent from the table that the students were slightly more familiar with plastic pollution and gender equality than with the other topics on the list. This can be explained by the fact that these are rather topical issues both on social media and in school, and in many cases, they are part of language examination topics.

In their reflections, most students commented that by discussing these topics they became more knowledgeable about them. They elaborated by stating that they became aware of the extent (#2, #3, #5, #6, #9, #10, #12, #13, #14, #16, #17) and the complexity (#2, #6, #18) of the issues. In Student 9's words on fashion waste: "this was one of those topics which I didn't have previous knowledge about, and I also didn't think about the enormous impact it has on our planet and our environment". Student 17 was fascinated by "the extreme numbers of how much food goes to waste each year", and Student 13 "realised the extent of the problem worldwide". They seemed rather satisfied by the fact that they learnt about the solutions to these problems (#1, #2, #3, #6, #8, #13, #14) and they discovered local and personal connections, i.e., the relevance (#1, #3, #5, #6, #8, #11, #18) of these topics.

Considering the skills, they appreciated that they managed to engage with different perspectives (#2, #3, #5, #6, #7, #8, #9, #11, #14, #15, #16, #17, #18) during the course, both by watching the assigned videos and discussing the issues with their group mates. For instance, in the lesson on sex education, Student 5 truly enjoyed the opinion line task, where they could line up according to how much they agreed with a given statement, because "it made [her] realise how differently [they] think about [the topic]." Student 6 saw it similarly:

I found it beneficial that we could get to know our classmates' opinions on this topic through different questions, and due to the form of the activity, I could exchange experiences and thoughts about the issue with many people with diverse ideas.

Student 7 mused about an activity connected to gender equality and how it made her see an issue (more swear words connected to women than men) in a different light: "I never thought about it before and I am glad I can see it from a new perspective." The reflections also highlighted that the students learnt how to reason with information. Some students (#5, #6, #10, #11, #13, #15) commented that the presentation assignment encouraged them to delve deep into these issues, research data and present it comprehensibly, considering multiple sides.

Another skill many students reflected on was the ability to take action (#1, #2, #3, #6, #12, #13, #14, #15, #16, #18). In their reflections, they elaborated on their responsibility to make a change



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in their own lives by reading up on the topics and paying more attention to their activities in future. The following quotes capture the students' realisations of their roles in tackling the problems and some pledges for future action:

- a) "We could all see that there are many ways to tackle this problem with a little bit of planning, using applications, such as Munch, taking responsibility for our actions and realising that every little step could make a difference." (#2 on food waste)
- b) "I came to the realisation that even though I tried to do my best not to waste so much food; that is not enough, and I could do more. I learnt many ideas, like buying in bulk, organising food based on expiry date, composting or donating. I will definitely use these techniques to make less waste of food." (#3 on food waste)
- c) "Overall, since I learnt about food waste, I've been trying my very best to take our biodegradable trash to a communal composting spot just a street away from our apartment. It might not make the biggest difference, but I know that every little action counts." (#9 on food waste)
- d) "Since I've learnt how beach and waterfront cleanups actually help a lot, I would feel more useful participating in a program like this than before. I also feel an inclination to get into activism." (#13 on plastic pollution)
- e) "I think it's really important to inform others about the circumstances their garments are made in and I will definitely encourage others not to shop from fast fashion [retailers]." (#16 on fashion pollution)

Some students commented on changes in their attitudes following the discussions. They reported an increased awareness of the issues and greater open-mindedness about the solutions to these problems. They acknowledged their role in global challenges and recognised the impact of small-scale actions.

Overall, based on the students' reflections, one can justifiably conclude that they effectively developed some aspects of their global competence: their knowledge about different global issues, their skills of taking perspectives, arguing with information and taking action towards well-being and sustainable development, and their attitudes of global mindedness (OECD, 2018).

#### **4.2. The Students' Views on the Ways the Course Contributed to Developing Their Global Competence**

In their reflections, the students highlighted several course components which helped them develop their global competence. One such aspect was the handout (#1, #2, #3, #6, #8, #10, #11, #12) that they needed to fill in at home before each lesson. Overall, the students appreciated that the videos they had to watch were informative and at times, shocking; and that the questions they had to answer were thought-provoking and open-ended. Another recurring theme was the group (#1, #2, #3, #6, #8, #9, #11, #18) itself. At the beginning of the semester, significant effort was invested in creating a safe environment, facilitating student bonding and open expression. The students commented that this safe space helped them open up and they enjoyed working with people with slightly different perspectives on these problems. The group atmosphere was also noted in the end-of-the-term feedback:

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- a) “Everyone could express their opinion in a constructive environment. It is always nice to be part of a community where people are curious about each other and can discuss their ideas freely.” (#11)
  - b) “I felt very comfortable, there was no judgment in the group - or at least I didn't feel it. The others were open-minded and they were not afraid to share their thoughts.” (#14)
  - c) “I found my classmates to be quite nice and accepting, sharing their knowledge about the topics and discussing their personal views and experiences openly. The general atmosphere was very trusting and empathetic, which is essential when one wants to see where the other is coming from in a conversation.” (#18)

Finally, the reflections indicate that the students found several interactive, hands-on activities particularly effective in developing their global competence:

- a) The opinion line activity (#2, #3, #5, #6, #7, #9, #11, #15) facilitated spatial representation of opinions on sex education, allowing students to gauge the slight differences in opinion.
- b) The gallery walk activity (#2, #5, #6, #8, #9, #10, #11, #15) provided the students with different sources connected to fashion waste, promoting in-depth discussions in pairs.
- c) The station tasks activity (#2, #6, #7, #8, #9, #11, #13, #14, #17) on gender equality enabled varied small-group discussions across different aspects of the topic.
- d) The put-a-finger-down activity (#6, #7, #9, #11, #14), inspired by a TikTok challenge, highlighted shared experiences of gender-based discrimination, eliciting strong emotional responses and nurturing empathic responses.
- e) The role-play (#2, #5, #6, #9, #11) on bullying fostered empathy by encouraging students to step into the shoes of different characters.
- f) The presentations on relevant issues (#1, #5, #6, #7, #8, #10, #11, #13, #14, #15, #18) enhanced research, synthesis, and information-sharing skills, both as listeners and creators.

The observation notes and the first author’s reflective journal corroborated high student engagement during these activities. However, whole-class feedback sessions were notably less enthusiastic, suggesting difficulties in whole-class expression. Additionally, while students enjoyed creating presentations, their delivery often appeared unpractised. Therefore, it would be worth putting more emphasis on encouraging students to speak in front of a whole group, which is particularly crucial for aspiring teachers in this cohort.

### 4.3. The Students’ Views on the Course

Based on their engagement during the course (documented in the observations and reflective journal) and their end-of-the-term feedback, it is reasonable to assert that most students had positive views of the course. They found that it contributed to developing their language skills, it made them more confident speakers, and helped them expand their vocabulary as well.

- a) “Now I feel more confident in speaking in front of others, and I can express my opinions about different matters more effectively.” (#6)
- b) “I have limited opportunities to have a conversation about such serious and important topics, so I think I'm more confident in sharing my opinion in general.” (#14)
- c) “I learned many new words and expressions that I can use in the future.” (#3)

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- d) “During this course, I have learnt a lot of very useful terms, and the best part is that I can actually use them in essays, tests, or elsewhere, as they are useful.” (#7)

As highlighted in the previous section, they enjoyed most of the activities and believed they led to developing their knowledge and understanding of global issues. Nevertheless, there seem to have been some components of the course some students did not necessarily enjoy: Student 14, for example, commented that she found some words and the activities that accompanied them too difficult, and Student 8 did not fancy writing reflections after each thematic lesson. Even though the reflections were not entirely popular (some students only completed 1-2 out of 7), those students who wrote them week by week had the chance to use the new vocabulary in context and reflect on their skills development at the same time.

Finally, to assess students’ views on the course, it seems apposite to reveal how they answered the question: *Did the course – in any respect – contribute to you becoming a (better) global citizen?* All the students who filled in the end-of-the-term feedback (N = 13) agreed that the course helped them in various ways. In Student 6’s words, “through broadening my knowledge regarding the environmental and societal issues, my opinion has changed about some of the problems, and because of this, now I feel that my mindset and way of thinking have improved”. Student 14 saw it similarly and added that she developed her ability to take action: “I am now more aware of the society and global changes and things that are happening around me, and I have now more courage to speak up”. Finally, Student 11 realised the importance of these discussions for teacher trainees: “I have realised how important these issues are, and while elaborating on them I started implementing ideas into my daily routine. And I am going to spread the importance of talking about global issues once I become a teacher.”

#### 4.4. Discussion of the Results

The results presented in 4.1. reveal an increased knowledge, awareness and understanding of global issues, which was an important goal when designing the course. These results underscore the importance of integrating real-life issues into the curriculum for awareness-raising purposes in line with findings from previous research (Basarir & Sari, 2022; Bayraktar Balkir, 2021; Divéki, 2024; Gimenez et al., 2011; Nelson, 2015; Tekin, 2011). As can be seen from the above, the incorporation of global issues with the right methodology could also entail the development of global skills and attitudes. The participants reported developing critical skills, such as perspective-taking (including empathy), argumentation and taking action, similar to students participating in previous studies (Divéki, 2024; Gimenez et al., 2011; Nelson, 2015; van Melle & Ferreira, 2022). It was, however, rather surprising that the students did not mention developing their critical thinking skills in their reflections, even though through reflecting on their development, they could have taken a critical perspective. Through the course, however, the students commented on becoming more global-minded and believing that making small changes in their lives counts in the grand scheme of things, similar to other researchers’ students (Gimenez et al., 2011; Nelson, 2015, van Melle & Ferreira, 2022).

Based on the results presented in 4.2., the various interactive, student-centred activities (e.g., opinion line, gallery walk, role-play) turned out to be effective in engaging students and fostering global competence. While these activities enhanced the learning environment, their successful implementation depended on the initial establishment of a safe space through deliberate group formation tasks and the setting of clear ground rules. The main benefit of using these collaborative activities lies in their dual potential of improving global competence and

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language skills, particularly speaking confidence (effective and respectful communication is an important subskill of global competence – OECD, 2018; Starkey, 2023). As pointed out above, however, it became clear from the observations that students prefer expressing themselves in smaller groups to speaking in front of other students. In future research endeavours, it would be thus beneficial to explore what activities could encourage them to step out of their comfort zones and confidently reveal their opinion in a whole class setting as well.

As presented in 4.3., overall, the students had positive experiences with the course: they enjoyed the activities and believed it was conducive to developing both their language and global skills. Even though the students signed up for a thematic language development seminar with language aims only at the beginning of the semester, the fact that they developed skills that will be useful for them in other aspects of life observably increased their satisfaction with the course. The feedback and the weekly reflection tasks also encouraged them to ponder the development of these skills, making them more aware global citizens.

## 5. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the extent to which a thematic language development seminar focussing on global content can contribute to developing second-year university students' global competence and its perceived effectiveness. The findings suggest that integrating global issues into language education can effectively develop both language skills and global competence among university students.

The course successfully enhanced students' knowledge and awareness of global issues, corroborating previous research (Basarir & Sari, 2022; Bayraktar Balkir, 2021; Divéki, 2024; Gimenez et al., 2011; Nelson, 2015; Tekin, 2011). Students also reported developing global skills such as perspective-taking, argumentation, and the ability to take action, which are crucial components of global competence (OECD, 2018). Implementing interactive, student-centred activities proved particularly effective in engaging students and developing global competence. The students' positive responses to the course undergird the value of integrating global issues into language education. However, the study also revealed areas for improvement for future courses. Some students found certain aspects challenging, such as speaking in front of the whole class or completing regular reflections.

The study has several implications for both higher educational practice and policy. Language teachers should consider integrating global issues and competence development into language courses, to enhance both language skills and global awareness, preparing students more effectively for our unpredictable world. Nonetheless, as global education is a cross-curricular approach, other subject teachers could also assess their subjects and look for creative ways to integrate real-life problems to engage their students. For a potential long-term impact on education systems, it seems crucial to incorporate global education into teacher training programmes: future teachers should recognise the benefits of discussing global issues so that they become convinced to implement them in their own practice.

As for the pedagogical implications, the success of student-centred activities in this study implies that educators should prioritise such techniques in their teaching. This may require professional development opportunities to help teachers implement these activities effectively. The course material created by the first author, however, can help teachers include global topics in their classes: (<https://shorturl.at/FFWD9>). Finally, the role of reflections in promoting

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awareness of skills development must be noted: while some students find the practice rather challenging, teachers should consider incorporating regular reflective exercises (probably with some scaffolding questions) into their courses to encourage meta-cognitive thinking. In the words of van Melle and Ferreira (2022, p. 15), there is an increasing need to develop “creative and curious learners who can think critically and analytically to become resilient in a changing world.”

The limitations of this study include the small sample size, its focus on a single cohort at one university and the researchers’ close involvement with the group in question. Future research could expand on these findings by investigating similar approaches across different educational contexts and with larger sample sizes, taught by non-researcher teachers.

In conclusion, this study provides evidence for the effectiveness of integrating global issues into language education to foster global competence. It suggests that carefully designed courses with dual aims of language and global skills development can effectively prepare students for an increasingly interconnected and unpredictable world. As one student aptly noted, recognising the importance of these discussions for future teachers, such courses can have a ripple effect, potentially influencing how the next generation of teachers approaches global issues in their own classrooms.

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## Declaration Statements

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The author reports no conflict of interest.

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### Ethics Statement

No dataset is associated with this article.

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