Application of cooperative learning in teaching foreign languages for professional purposes

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Abstract: The aim of this research paper was to explore the students' awareness of cooperative learning methods and their application in higher education institutions (HEI). The introductory part of the paper contains a brief survey of the history of cooperative learning and the explanation of basic concepts. The focus of empirical research was on data collection on the importance and benefits of applying cooperative methods in teaching as well as on the learners' perception of the differences between traditional instruction and cooperative learning. Two hypotheses were formulated: the first one on the students' awareness of innovative teaching methods was corroborated; the second one on benefits of cooperative learning methods for students' future careers was only partially corroborated.

Key words: Cooperative learning, creativity, foreign language instruction, higher education institution (HEI)

1 Introduction

The role of university education is to prepare learners for coping with the challenges and problems of the 21st century; it has to support the practical application of theoretical knowledge acquired in the course of their studies in real-life conditions. In this context, it appears to be highly important to develop learners' inner cognition, which is determined by personal experience. As a result of fast-developing living conditions, we view memorizing facts as less relevant; what we perceive as desirable is learning in contexts, application of the knowledge acquired, competencies and skills. A frequent complaint made both by students and teachers nowadays is that students tend to have encyclopedic knowledge but are unable to utilize it in real life. Higher education has to respond to changes in society, which do not only call forth the change in the learning content, development of new study programs, change in the organization of education in itself, evaluation of students' results achieved, mutual relationships between the university teacher and the student, but in particular those in using methods of education. The outcome of students' learning should include acquiring competencies including critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, teamwork, understanding other cultures, and communicative competence. New educational methods should motivate and activate higher education students so that they can further utilize them in the performance of their professions based on acquired theoretical findings and practical skills.

We believe that cooperative learning is a solution to applying theoretical findings in practice. Cooperative learning is one of the ways of facilitating the mastering

of the demanding challenges of education. In the context of this article, we reflect on the need for working with methods of developing this concept on the part of teachers at higher education institutions (HEI). Its contribution is mainly its social and ethical dimension. In other words, it is about developing responsibility, honesty, tolerance, empathy, cooperation, and other qualities and skills. Using an analogy, we rely on Gavora's statement that "with the advent of cognition- oriented psychology and pedagogy, less emphasis came to be placed on decoding meanings and the reproductive and automated nature of activity in literacy; interest was shifted to literacy as the processing of textual information" (2003, pp. 12–13).

Bozarth (1997) deals with, apart from other topics, the essence of man as a personality and claims that the human essence is social; self-esteem is a fundamental human need; human beings are motivated to pursue the truth; while in the case of a therapist (in Rogerian terminology, in our case this is a university teacher) it is their attitude to a very important individual. At this point, we conclude that the quality of teaching at HEIs can be efficiently increased if teachers are familiar with the most recent trends and share innovative findings from education, didactics, and psychology, and of course, also from the course content taught, and can transfer these innovations in their teaching practice.

A rational justification of the necessity to cooperate was presented by the Russian psychologist L. E. Vygotsky (1978), nowadays a worldwide cited author in education and psychology literature. Vygotsky claims the roots of mental functions and performances (education, sophistication) are in social relationships and emphasizes the importance of group work and problem-solving using argumentation, negotiating, discussion, and compromise. It is the very cooperation that is an indispensable tool of the cognitive growth of a learning community. Slavin (1980) describes cooperative learning as an old idea of learning, which has experienced a substantial revival in educational research and practice in the past few years (Slavin, 1980, p. 315; Bousalem et al., 2023).

Cooperative learning described as a holistic approach to working with students is a current requirement of academic education in terms of methods as well as didactics. At this point, it appears to be suitable to mention this is by no means a new concept: it was presented by Kagan as early as the turn of the twentieth century. Spencer Kagan (1985, pp. 103–124), who developed principles and strategies of cooperative learning, relied on the works of R. Johnson and D. Johnson (1985). These two authors explored the problems several years before Kagan, and not only laid the foundations of the cooperative methodology but also demonstrated its effectiveness in comparison with traditional forms and methods of education through developing the learners' mutual positive relationships. Learners' self-confidence and learning motivation are increasing; owing to a rising effectiveness and empathy learners are better integrated in multicultural groups;

their stress and restraints are broken down; students learn to think critically and achieve better results in knowledge acquisition and acquire various skills. In our opinion, activating learning and teaching strategies and techniques orient learners to experiential learning, while emphasizing problem-solving. (Johnson and Johnson, 1985; Johnson et al., 1998; Johnson et al., 2007). Activating techniques include discussion methods, cooperative learning methods, project-based methods, critical thinking methods, case studies, and other research methods as described also by Breveníková and Seresová (2018, pp. 15–16), based on their direct teaching experience.

In this paper, we draw ideas from research studies by proponents of both cooperative and collaborative learning approaches. While some authors refer to them as two distinct approaches, differing in terms of origin and development paths and sharing some similar features, others treat the names of these two approaches as synonyms (Yang, 2023). Laal and Ghodsi divided the list of collaborative learning benefits, into four main groups, namely: "social, psychological, academic and assessment benefits" (Laal, & Ghodsi, 2012, Abstract; Aporbo, 2023; Mendo-Lázaro et al., 2022). More recent studies in cooperative learning deal with its social interaction element and its role in online education in particular in the period of rising role of artificial intelligence in education. (Ghavifekr, 2020; Lu, & Smiles, 2022; Mena-Guacas, et al., 2023). Collaborative learning is described as a "manifestation of sociocultural theory" (Novita, et al., 2020). Järvela and Järvenoja (2010), Järvenoja, et al. (2020) as well as Loes (2022) focus on the role of motivation and emotional aspect of collaborative learning. Mende, et al. (2021) deal with the preparation for this approach to learning by an individual. Ait Hattani lists the following principles of cooperative learning: "positive interdependence, individual accountability, quality of group processing, interpersonal and social skills, and positive interaction" (Ait Hattani, 2024). In this paper, the authors focus on the form of cooperative learning and explore the application of a broad spectrum of cooperative techniques in the HEI learning environment.

Various aspects of innovative methods in language learning, including cooperative methods have been explored at the Faculty of Applied Languages, University of Economics in Bratislava, Slovakia and applied in teaching courses in Intercultural communication, negotiations as well as German studies. The author of this paper has been involved in the issues of cooperative methods in her teaching in seminars in International business negotiations for several years. She published a monograph *Interkulturelle Verhandlungen – Strategien, Methoden, und Konzepte der Problembewältigung* (Helmová, & Janíčková, 2012). At that time, this didactically novel teaching material had the ambition to incorporate into the teaching methods of a newly established Faculty of Applied Languages at the University of Economics in Bratislava (2010) novel methods of education in response to the needs resulting from the Faculty's conceptual intent. These changes were expected to

be more demanding, and more entertaining, requiring teamwork and supporting critical thinking, the outcome of which is problem-solving, and with a vision to master demands of economic practice in real-life problem solving. The intention of the course material was and remains to be education, the aim of which is to prepare learners to face challenges of the times, permanent changes in life as well as in professional activities. In this context, it appeared desirable to develop in learners creative thinking determined by personal experience. After several years of applying cooperative methods in business negotiations problem-solving, we can state, this very method of teaching is highly activating; it strengthens social relationships between learners in groups; when dealing with problem-solving, they relieve stress and find various interesting solutions.

University education has to respond to changes in society not only through changes in the learning content but also in new study programs, in the organization's management, as well as applying teaching methods. The outcome of learning should involve problem-solving competencies, creativity, teamwork, understanding other cultures, communicative skills, foreign language skills as well as critical thinking. Cooperative learning methods motivate and activate learners who apply them in the performance of their future jobs. Creative methods also consider the learners' personality traits; as an example, Helmová (2023) refers to brainstorming and recommends using it in presentations by students who are less skilled in rhetoric. The author interprets the results of the survey in the application of creative methods. Kunovská (2023) claims that the role of modern education is not only to place emphasis on the acquisition of professional knowledge but also on personality and social development of young generation and views a sophisticated preparation of students for their future professional career as a path to succeeding on the labor market. An individual who wants to cope with the competition related to their social status should master the competencies that enable them to establish themselves in the labor market. Kucharová (2017) deals with mind-mapping techniques as means leading to meaningful learning, explores the essence of meaningful learning theory, defines mind-mapping techniques, and describes their various types. The author explains how the mapping techniques can be applied in teaching German as a foreign language.

2 Methodology

The need for linking university education with a successful application of theoretical knowledge in practice is a basic requirement in the profile of university student. On the basis of our research in the needs of societal practice and its subsequent application, we consider our research to be applied. This also results in the focus of our attention in the survey on the effectiveness of innovating methods in education and their favorable influence on their application in practice. In connection with the topic, objectives set forth and formulated in another part of our

paper and in accordance with our intentions, we applied the methods of qualitative research of analysis and synthesis as well as the quantitative research – questionnaire and comparison. We are aware of some disadvantages of the questionnaire method in that it may provide a lower return of completed questionnaires as well as the validity of the required replies, which may be negatively influenced by such factors as the wording of individual items or the respondents themselves. On the other hand, the rate of credibility of the questionnaire method is increased by an anonymous questionnaire, which contains more truthful responses since the respondents, as a rule, have no need to present reality in more favorable colors. Our ambition was to explore how university students perceive education at the Faculty of Applied Languages, University of Economics in Bratislava (UEBA) through innovative education methods.

We formulated the following two research questions and searched for responses to them:

1. What kind of difference do our students perceive between the traditional teaching and modern teaching?
2. What are the personal benefits that the new teaching methods bring the students in the context of their further professional career?

The hypotheses articulated for our research, which were subject to verification, are formulated as follows:

1. We assume that our students have at least basic awareness of the existence of innovating teaching methods from preceding cycles of education.
2. We assume that students of the Faculty of Applied Languages, UEBA, are aware of the benefits of the cooperative learning for their further professional career after graduating from the university.

The research sample consisted of 90 students, which corresponds to 100% of students of bachelor's and master's programs, who were addressed. The survey was taken by 64 respondents of bachelor's and 26 students of master's study programs Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication at the Faculty of Applied Languages, UEBA, who submitted fully completed questionnaires.

Our research project was based on a short questionnaire consisting of nine questions, the aim of which was to acquire information from students regarding their awareness of innovative methods of instruction and their importance in university education. As mentioned earlier, the research sample consisted of students of bachelor's and master's levels of study at the Faculty of Applied Languages, UEBA. All the students pursuing the study program of Foreign Languages and Intercultural Education have a curricular instruction in the English language in combi-

nations with German, French or Spanish. The questionnaires were distributed to students of the Faculty of Applied Languages, UEBA in March and April 2023. The participation in completing and submitting completed questionnaires was voluntary.

In the first question, we expected the students to provide information on when they first encountered cooperative learning methods. There were five options how to reply to this question: primary school, secondary school, higher education institution, in some foreign countries, or never. In the second question, we wanted to find out what innovative learning methods they knew, and whether they could identify such methods at all. The purpose of the third question was to find out the students' personal opinions of the benefits of innovative methods of learning, especially in connection with their future professional careers. Students could choose from the following three options: "yes", "no", and "I don't know", while they were expected to give reasons for their answers. In the fourth question, respondents were asked to name three cooperative learning methods which could be efficient in teaching problem-solving in the professional sphere. The fourth task was directly linked to the fifth one, in which respondents were expected to explain the reasons for their preceding responses. In the sixth question, we explored if innovative methods were used in teaching core subject disciplines in the students' study program. Respondents were offered five options as answers – "yes", "always", "occasionally", "very seldom", and "never". When formulating the seventh question, we were interested in if the students perceived innovative methods of teaching as beneficial in view of their future careers. In their answers to this question, the respondents were expected to use one of the three options: "yes", "no", or "I don't know", and explain their opinions. Then they were asked what they viewed as the difference between innovative methods and traditional (classic) teaching methods. The purpose of the final question was to find out whether innovative methods of instruction are also applied in teaching other subject disciplines at the Faculty of Applied Languages.

In our survey and evaluation of its results, we used applied qualitative and quantitative research methods, which included analysis and synthesis methods, questionnaire method, and the comparison method. In view of the scope of our survey (nine questions and ninety respondents), our research can be considered a pilot research study for further, more extensive and in-depth studies, which can bring new data regarding the frequency of phenomena investigated.

3 Results and implications

This chapter deals with the evaluation of respondents' replies in the questionnaire survey (see Attachment 1.). In the first question, respondents were asked to indicate **the level of education when they came into contact with cooperative**

learning methods for the first time. Results of questionnaire analysis show that with the exception to one student (2%) all other students (98%) encountered innovative methods at all levels of their education so far. This high percentage of our students who are aware of cooperative methods in education testifies to a desirable situation, namely that the students concerned are very well-informed about these methods. In their answers, both bachelor and master students chose the first three options with the following percentage share: Bachelor's program of study: primary school – 34%, secondary school – 56%, and HEI – 8%. Master's program respondents gave the following replies: primary school – 31%, secondary school – 61%, and HEI – 8%. The option "abroad" was not used by any respondent, and only one respondent marked the last option, i.e. "never". As Figure 1 shows, the percentage data provided by students of both levels of study were similar. The data presented indicate that the highest share of cooperative learning methods and techniques was experienced at secondary school, where the new trends are captured fastest, and learners have at their disposal the most recent materials and teaching strategies. However, our assumption needs to be confirmed after a larger and more complex study covering a longer period.

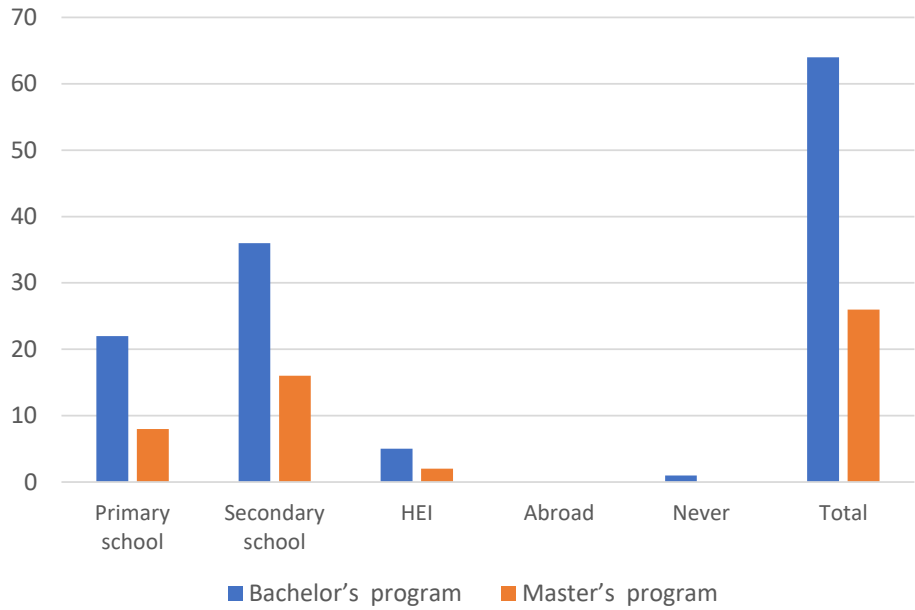

Fig. 1: *First encounters with cooperative learning methods*

Apart from that, in the second question we focused on **what innovating cooperative learning methods students were familiar with and had some experience in**

using them. Respondents' replies to the second question resulted in the following ten methods: brainstorming method, problem-solving method, mind-mapping method, critical thinking method, project learning method, case study method, method of six thinking hats, role-playing method, 635 method, and the VODA (visualized, organized, and dynamized association) method. The ten most frequently applied methods (Helmová, & Janíčková, 2012) were ranked in the first up to the fifth positions in both levels of study; however, the percentage of their occurrence was different. The brainstorming method accounted for the highest percentage of the teaching methods (Bc – 84% and M – 92%) used in both levels of study, out of the ten most frequently applied methods of the aspect monitored. It was followed by the mind mapping (Bc – 78% and M – 68%), and the third place was occupied by the case study method (Bc – 78% and M – 88%). The fourth place was taken by project teaching with values of (Bc – 78% and M – 88%). The fifth place fell to the role-playing method (Bc – 75% and M – 73%). At the opposite side of the spectrum of innovating educational methods found 635 method (Bc – 3% and M – 4%) as well as the VODA method (Bc– 1.5% and M– 2%). Their application did not exceed 2%. Even though the application of cooperative methods may appear favorable, this situation can be interpreted as a stagnating result, which is confirmed by low percentages of applying the opposite spectrum methods. This phenomenon indicates that the innovative power of teaching has stopped at some point, and we can assume that this stagnation may act as an obstacle to applying other, less known cooperative methods and is connected, in our opinion, with the preferences of particular methods by associate professors who teach respondents' classes.

In the following two related questions, the students were asked **if** they expected that **the skills acquired through training in cooperative learning would be useful and beneficial in their future professional activities**. Respondents could opt for one of the three replies: "yes", "no" and "I don't know" and give reasons for their answers. According to the research, 86% of the bachelor research sample and 77% of master students replied in the affirmative and stated that innovative methods could be suitable in the performance of their future profession, and they could imagine how these methods could be applied in practice. They justified their choice with the present-day need for teamwork, which requires critical and strategic thinking skills, develops creative abilities of searching for answers and problem-solving, and leads learners to analyze the state-of-art. Only 9% of bachelor respondents and 4% of master respondents marked the negative reply in this case. These students did not justify their choice. However, 5% of bachelor students opted for the answer "I don't know", and 19% of master respondents were unable to explain why they could not choose any of the preceding options. Even though the final results of the aspect monitored were unanimous in favor of the master's "yes" answer (88% – Bc vs. 77% – M), it can be stated that the result provides only average data at a relatively low participation in research. However,

in the end, the research shows a negligible group of respondents in both levels of study, namely 5% of bachelor and 19% of master students, do not realize at all advantages of innovative methods and their benefits for practice. (See Figures 2 and 3.)

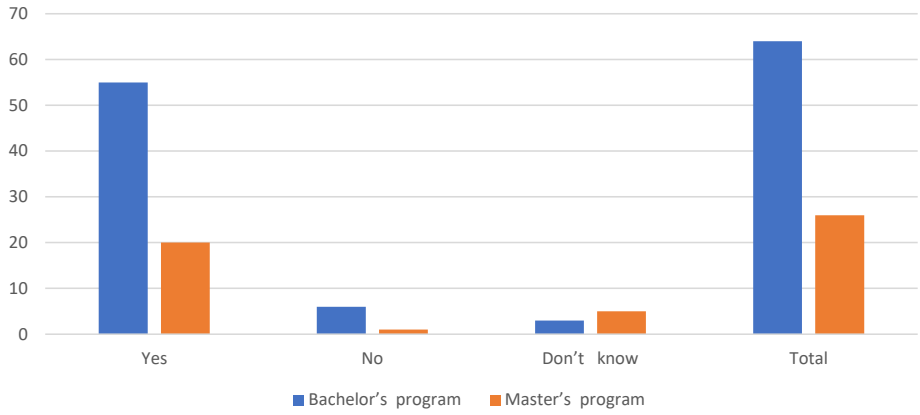

Fig. 2: *Importance of cooperative methods for personality and professional development*

In their answers to the fifth question, the respondents were expected to **name three,** according to them, the **most effective cooperative methods in problem-solving**. Simultaneously, we intended to find out arguments supporting the cooperative methods listed by the respondents. The rate of response in the bachelor respondent group was 56%: 36 respondents of the total number of 64 respondents. In the master respondent group, 20 respondents of the total number of 26 respondents replied, which accounts for 77% of all master students participating in the research. However, 28% of those who participated in the survey mentioned they had heard of problem-solving by means of cooperative methods in instruction, but they were not able to imagine what was behind that. This kind of response indicates respondents' low competency, either theoretical or the practical one, thus also their inability or ignorance to choose effective cooperative problem-solving methods. In the group of bachelor respondents, the first three positions (listed successively from the first position) were occupied by the critical thinking method (31%), brainstorming method (15%), and problem-based teaching (15%). Students supported their decisions with arguments, as for example, "overcoming fear of public speaking in public; acquiring soft skills for life; adaptation in a team; raising interest in the topic or acquiring practical experience". Arguments of bachelor students appeared rather general than oriented to problem-solving. Respondents of master's study listed the following methods: brainstorming method (38%), critical thinking method (24%), and case studies (10%). Argu-

ments in favor of choosing methods by master students brought a rather different view of the problem-solving area, as for instance, "searching for several solutions, critical consideration of several options of how to solve the problem, dividing the problem as a whole into several parts, understanding the problem, and its communication in a team." We have not found any significant difference between the two levels of study as regards the selection of problem-solving methods; however, a significant difference appeared in respondents' argumentation of reasons for choosing methods. While the arguments in the first level of university study tend to be rather psychologically or sociologically charged, in the second level the students' arguments are technical, i.e. connected with practical problem-solving skills. When interpreting these observations, we could start from the assumption that although the bachelor students know a lot of methods, the degree of their practical problem-solving skills is low, which may be ascribed to limited practical skills acquired in creative teaching.

The seventh question, which was about the **application of cooperative learning methods in subject disciplines of the study program** Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication, brought interesting findings in some cases. Students assessed the situation by selecting one of the four options: "yes", "occasionally", "seldom", and "no". Based on the results (see Fig. 3) it can be concluded that the academic community at the Faculty of Applied Languages should seriously consider how to integrate innovative cooperative methods in the syllabi of their courses, and in this way increase the credibility of education on the one hand, as well as that of teachers, on the other.

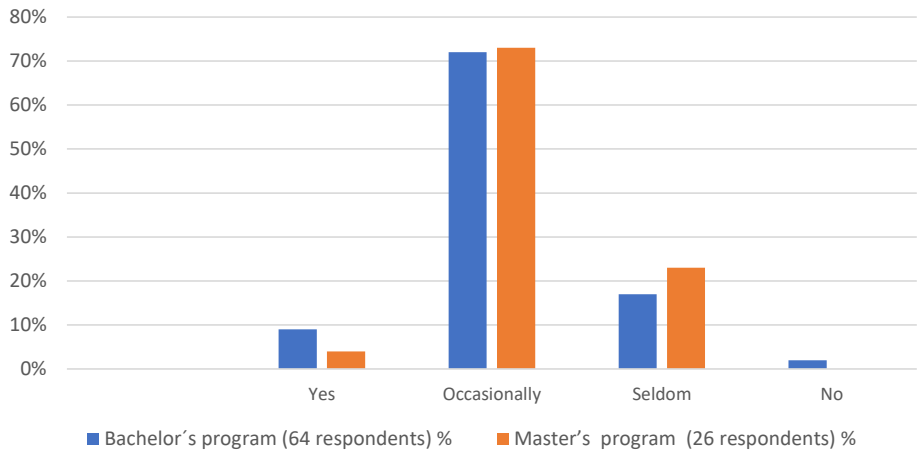

Fig. 3: *Application of cooperative learning methods in teaching*

The purpose of the eighth question was to **investigate the respondents' views of the benefit of innovative teaching methods compared with traditional teaching**. The data showed that, except for three bachelor students, which accounts for 5% of the bachelor respondent group, who spoke in favor of traditional teaching and 3% of all those interviewed in the survey, all other respondents believe cooperative learning is more useful, more entertaining, and interactive. In their opinion, cooperative learning offers multiple creative perspectives on the given issue compared to classical method of teaching, requires teamwork, improves relationships between students in the group, and supports critical thinking and creativity. The students also described the traditional teaching which they described as memorizing data and facts, which is monotonous, less interesting and less effective for retaining the knowledge, and referred to it as a type of instruction where the student is just sitting and listening. The three respondents who spoke in favor of the traditional (classic approach) method of teaching were open in expressing their opinions and stated that innovative methods only distracted them during the teaching process and diverted the learner's attention from the topic. They even described the application of these methods as a disturbing element, with which they would in no way replace the traditional teaching method. They also argued that everyone could learn as they see fit. On the other hand, respondents understand that teachers should keep up with the times. Of course, it is also possible to agree with such arguments. We even believe there are some exact sciences where innovative and cooperative methods are more difficult to apply (e.g. mathematics). However, the research results show that the popularization of innovative methods and especially their practical mastery in the educational process greatly contribute to the development of the student's personality and can be viewed as a good tool for developing cognitive abilities and acquiring numerous skills and competencies needed to succeed on the labor market.

The ninth, i.e., the final question of the questionnaire concerned **the students' satisfaction with the application of innovative cooperative methods across a broad scale of subject disciplines** (including also economics) in the study program Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication at the Faculty of Applied Languages, University of Economics in Bratislava. From among tens of opinions and assessments of this aspect by respondents pursuing both levels of study, we have decided to cite the most frequently repeated and inspiring responses:

> Innovative methods are not sufficiently used; this is the case of case studies.
>
> At our faculty, the traditional method of teaching and assessment is preferred.
>
> Innovative methods are used quite often, but they are always the same.
>
> There is always room for some improvement, although they (i.e. the methods) are used properly and frequently.

It's getting better every year; however, instruction should be more oriented towards practice.

It is necessary to use more innovative methods, since a lot of methods (used) are about memorizing.

I have no opinion about that; I have never thought these activities are something special and exceptional.

Compared with Western Europe and its system of education, there are still few opportunities for discussions.

As the survey shows, the respondents' opinions and observations vary, and sometimes they are contradictory. We suppose that the diversity in answering may result from the following two factors: The first one is the respondents' personal preferences, and the second one may be a system and form of teaching at previous levels of study completed by the students. In sum, in general we can state that most respondents would appreciate if cooperative methods were used more frequently in teaching at our institution, namely whenever it is possible. Moreover, and that is the most important thing, the respondents would appreciate more diversity in applying these methods.

In answer to the question of what innovative methods students know, and what their experiences are in this respect, the students demonstrated the knowledge of ten cooperative methods. Although their knowledge of the existence of cooperative methods may appear satisfactory, we can assess this as a low variability of applying other methods, in particular in the context of problem-solving. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a stagnation on the part of teachers regarding the scope of the methods applied in teaching. When examining the respondents' opinions on the application of knowledge and skills of innovative methods gained at the Faculty of Applied Languages in their future careers, we found the respondents were skeptical about that possibility. We identified only a small percentage difference in both levels of study. The most common benefits for using these methods for practice listed by the respondents included teamwork, critical and strategic thinking, developing creativity, and others. At the same time, however, the finding that several students were not aware of how and where innovative education could help them in their future working environment is a negative observation. The most striking difference between the master's and bachelor's levels of study was the output of the analysis of responses to the sixth question, where the respondents had to list arguments supporting the three problem-solving methods, which they considered to be the most adequate for the purpose. The selection of methods was comparable, but the bachelor students used psychological and sociological arguments to support the appropriateness of the methods. The master students listed professional and competency arguments, since they included such activities as dividing the problem into several parts, searching for several solutions, and critically considering several options. Respondents' answers to this question, on the one hand, indicate differences in bachelor respondents' abilities

to competently handle the methods and understand the essence of the problem-solving process; on the other hand, their replies reflect their limited creative skills.

Another less flattering observation is that respondents claimed that cooperative methods of teaching were used only occasionally at the Faculty of Applied Languages. This fact can be clearly attributed to respondents' preferences as well as to those of associate professors who teach respondents' classes.

4 Discussion and practical context

The problems of applying cooperative methods in teaching are a broadly discussed topic both in our country as well as abroad. Our research focused on exploring the awareness of our students of this innovative approach from several aspects. Its results brought valuable information relevant to improving the quality of our students' education in the future. The research was designed to explore to what extent the students perceive the benefits of cooperative learning as the preparation for their future operation on the labor market; what are their practical experiences in applying them during their study at the Faculty of Applied Languages, and what was their awareness of cooperative learning methods when they enrolled at the university after completing preceding levels of study. We considered it important to determine if the students are able to appreciate the usefulness of cooperative learning methods for themselves, how they could cope with problem solving in their future employment with the help of cooperative learning methods, and if they prefer the innovative or the traditional methods of learning and teaching. We were also interested to learn how the innovative element of learning was implemented in the entire spectrum of subject disciplines of the Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication study program at the Faculty of Applied Languages. On the one hand, we were pleased to find out that the students' awareness of the existence of these methods can be described as above average. On the other hand, in both levels of study it was confirmed that the students had gained that awareness mainly during their secondary school studies. This situation may be explained by the observation that secondary schools absorb new trends the fastest; however, this assumption would have to be verified in a more extensive study. On the other hand, it was our ambition to discuss our results with comparable studies. However, we have not found any research study or scholarly discussion about teaching foreign languages with focus on the learners' awareness and skills and specific links with future respondents' operation on the labor market. We believe that the questionnaire, which was designed according to the author's personal experience, fulfilled its purpose.

As an example of a popular method applied in our classes, we can describe the six thinking hats method (De Bono, 1997), which can be used in the practice of firm's setting (IBM, Schell, Ford or Siemens), as well as in personal life. De Bono

captured our attention as an author of lateral thinking, which is based on the idea that it detaches one from a traditional way of thinking. The basis of traditional thinking is logic, judgment and dichotomy (yes – no). Its aim is to select the best solution. The guarantee of the result is that each single item that has been reached is right. The focus of lateral thinking is not on answers, instead, it involves asking questions and searching for what differs from what we have already heard. Based on our experience, we have arrived at the conclusion that it is right to start with lateral thinking, after at first all options are revealed and then the most advantageous one of them is chosen. The six thinking hats method is an efficient instrument, which will enable us to consider major decisions from various angles. The best way to remember thinking in a particular hat is to put the hats in contrast: white and red, yellow and black, green and blue. Thinkers wearing colored hats take over the way of thinking under six hats, rather than presenting their own views. This is different, for example, in brainstorming, where all participants of the creative process present their own ideas and solutions. The six thinking hats method is very popular with students. Its essence is that each group has at its disposal white, yellow, blue, green, black, and red hats, which students exchange with each other, and in this way, they are able to change viewing a problem from various aspects. Each hat is a symbol of some other way of thinking. The author of this method offers the following explanation: The *white hat* represents an objective and neutral approach; *the red hat* means own opinion; *the black hat* is a symbol of objective negative aspects; *the yellow hat* objective positive aspects; *the green hat* stands for creativity and new ideas; the blue hat sybolizes an overall view of preceding opinions. Learners make notes of their findings from each angle, which enables each of the four groups to acquire a broad picture of the problem. When all the hats have rotated around, the results of the creative process of searching for the solution are summarized, and negotiations start. Our next best practice example contains the description of searching for a creative problem-solving of an example of a particular case experienced in teaching practice.

An Austrian company plans to close its manufacturing plant in Austria and move production to Slovakia. Due to the legal framework, the closing of the plant needs to be externally communicated this autumn. Existing employment contracts must also be terminated this autumn. The problem is that, despite the fact that the company has made high profits worldwide, which also must be announced in the autumn; it is shedding thousands of jobs in Austria. There is no longer any question of negotiating the closing of the plant; the question is how the employees who are to be made redundant are to be dealt with. As the decision-maker responsible for the negotiations and, at the same time, member of the plant management, you are in charge of exploring the general mood. You have to talk to these parties: the employees, the trade unions, the suppliers, and the customers.

Your task: Collect the information about what individual groups of employees think about becoming unemployed, or having their employment contracts end.

The diagram of processing and applying the method consists of several basic data and activities: *place of negotiation:* seminar; *topic:* creative search for the solution of the problem in the Commercial Negotiations course; *method:* six thinking hats; *duration*: 60+30 minutes; *number of creative groups*: four; *facilitator:* teacher; 1st aim: structuring students' own creativity; 2nd aim: negotiation with the plant management (decision maker); materials: sheets of paper, stationery, flipchart.

Description of the procedure: At the beginning, the facilitator explains the essence of the method, then the protocol officer and the time controller are selected, and the duration of the whole activity is determined. Each representative of the four creative groups mentioned in the case diagram (employees, unions, suppliers, and customers) is provided with hats of all colors symbolizing different ways of thinking. The students can exchange the hats between themselves as they wish. This means that everyone in the creative group changes their approach to the problem six times. In the end, the color of the hat within each group will also be decided. In the first stage, the groups start by putting on different hats one by one and each saying aloud what they think about the problem under the hat each of them is wearing. Then the ideas are collected and written, ideally on a flipchart for everybody to see. During the creative process of searching for solutions to the problem, we have found it useful to cover up the ideas already listed on the flipchart so that the further search process is not too affected by these ideas. At the next stage, it is also possible to put on the hats deliberately. For example, each student wears the green hat so that as many ideas as possible are gathered. The quality of ideas can be assessed also using yellow and black hats. The blue hat could be used to identify specific targets and measures. We have verified the method of six thinking hats several times in various groups of learners. At first, this creative method of problem solving seems to be complicated. On the one hand, it involves understanding the method and coordinating all activities; on the other hand, it requires the demanding preparation of materials and teaching aids. Moreover, the time factor of the entire process can also be a problem.

After the first creative processes, we found out that De Bono's 90-minute time planning has to be adjusted according to the type of group and the choice of a suitable problem. Gradually, we managed to eliminate the time shortage by dividing the creative process into two teaching units, namely: 1. collecting ideas and their presentation in one teaching/learning unit and 2. conducting negotiations on the selection of creative solutions by representatives of each group on one side with the company management on the other side. In conclusion, we want to emphasize that although creative methods will not make anyone an expert, they are an excellent way to train constructive and creative thinking, recognize the

potential in raw ideas for problem solving, and identify structures in the seeming chaos of results. The more often these creative methods are applied in teaching, the more competent students will become in searching for the right solutions to problems; they will attain better communication and social competencies and learn an interesting and entertaining way of learning.

5 Conclusion

Students of foreign languages should be prepared to perform some target activities, master professional situation in their work, as well as acquire receptive and productive skills.

The first aim we intended to fulfill was focusing the attention of the academic community on the nature and essence of cooperative education methods in higher education institutions as a process of achieving effective results. The second aim was to present the research conducted at the Faculty of Applied Languages, University of Economics in Bratislava in subject disciplines of the interdisciplinary study program Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication and contribute to a broad international scientific discussion about these problems. We can state the aims of the research that has been achieved.

We approached the presentation of our research with two hypotheses. The first one, which concerned the students' basic awareness of the existence of innovative teaching methods, was corroborated. The second hypothesis on the students' awareness of the cooperative methods benefits for practice was partially corroborated.

On the one hand, we recorded a very good level of awareness of cooperative learning methods existence; on the other hand, we were a little surprised by the respondents' low practical competency regarding their ability to assess the importance of these methods for their professional careers. The data collected gave us food for thought, and their analysis disclosed the areas and aspects in which it is necessary to improve indicators in order to increase the frequency and variability in using cooperative methods (which was also implied in respondents' comments) and to enable the students to acquire practical skills for their professional career. The students' opinions and their expectations related to their academic performance indicate the need for critical exploration and possibly supplementing their study program curricula with more diverse cooperative methods.

As mentioned earlier, our research study may be considered a pilot project in the area of innovative teaching in the HEI environment at the Faculty of Applied Languages, UEBA, which indicates the state-of-the-art of the problems studied, namely the application of cooperative methods in learning and teaching. We are aware of the limitations which rest in the size of the respondent sample, which

represents a smaller part of the actual number of students pursuing their studies at the Faculty of Applied Languages. In order to obtain more valid results, it is therefore necessary to conduct more extensive research across a longer time span.

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Attachment 1.

Questionnaire

Please complete the questionnaire. Its aim is to obtain an overview of your awareness of applying innovative cooperative methods of teaching at your faculty in the subject disciplines of your study program. The focus is on communication and work-related problems in international context. Use a cross to mark one answer only. If **necessary**, you can write **more answers**. Please, don't add any more options if more space is not provided. The questionnaire is anonymous and simple. Your answers will be used for research purposes only.

I study at the Faculty of Applied Languages, University of Economics in Bratislava (UEBA):

1st level (Bachelor's program) – 2nd level (Master's program)

1. Where did you first encounter cooperative methods?
   At primary school / secondary school / higher education institution / abroad / never
2. From the following list of cooperative methods, please, write out the methods you are familiar with, and/or add some others you know.
   Brainstorming, problem-based learning, mind mapping, critical thinking method, cooperative learning, project learning/teaching, case study method, six hats method, role playing, 635 method, VODA method.
3. Do you think that innovating cooperative methods can help students in their future professional career on the market?
   ☐ Yes (why?) ☐ No (why?) ☐ I don't know
   ……
   ……
4. Name three methods that in your opinion could be efficient in the professional problem-solving sector.
   ……
5. Give reasons for your answers.
   ……
   ……
   ……
6. Are innovative methods used in the course instruction of your study program?
   ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ I can't assess it
7. Do you believe that cooperative methods are beneficial for your future profession?
   ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ I can't assess it
8. What is the main benefit of innovative methods in comparison with traditional methods of teaching?
   ……
9. Give your opinion about the application of innovative methods in teaching at the Faculty of Applied Languages, UEBA in all subject disciplines, including economic courses.
   ……
   ……

Thank you for completing the questionnaire.

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The author is a university teacher. As the Doctor of Philology and International Business Relations, she conducts lectures and seminars in Intercultural Communication and International Business Negotiations in the German Language. In her teaching and scientific activities, she is involved in the integration of scholarly theories on cooperative methods of learning in education and teaching. Dr. Helmová has a long-term interest in problem-based communication from an international perspective and links this issue to conducting problem-based international business negotiations. In her research and methodological work, she attaches importance to the following research question: What are the basic impacts (benefits) of cooperative learning on successful problem solving with respect to international research methodology? The author is engaged in pedagogical activities with focus on the application of various cooperative forms of teaching in the search for effective solutions to problem-solving simulated situations. She explains the problem-solving alternatives in numerous communication and negotiation situations in a multicultural environment. In her teaching, she creatively applies active learning and cooperative learning methods and evaluates the efficiency of problem solving. Based on findings of the SWOT analysis of each solution, Dr. Helmová summarizes recommendations for student practice.