



The impact of hybrid intercultural intervention sprint (HIIS) on developing intercultural competence of adult business learners in Slovenia

Svitlana Buko*

Abstract: This paper presents research about the impact of a hybrid intercultural intervention sprint (HIIS) on the development of intercultural competencies in a group of Slovenian adult learners enrolled in a graduate-level MA business program. The study used a sequential design, with quantitative data collected both before (N=40) and after (N=36) the short sprint. The HIIS consisted of innovative hybrid learning activities implemented in the form of inventive case-based learning, that took place January-February 2023. The study utilized the VALUE rubric, a survey instrument that measures attitudes, values, and knowledge related to intercultural competencies, with 14 items on a Likert scale. The sequential design of the study allowed for a comparison of intercultural competencies before and after the learning. The results showed an increase in every category of intercultural competency, including attitudes (openness, curiosity), skills (communication, empathy), and knowledge (worldview and self-awareness): attitudes increased from 30% to 41.7%, skills increased from 22.55% to 41.7%, and knowledge increased from 42.5% to 58.3%.

Keywords: intercultural competence, business adult learners, hybrid intervention, sprint learning, case-based learning,

JEL classification: I21

Vpliv hibridnega medkulturnega intervencijskega programa (HIIS) na razvoj medkulturne kompetence učečih odraslih v Sloveniji

Povzetek: Prispevek predstavlja raziskavo o vplivu hibridnega medkulturnega intervencijskega sprinta (HIIS) na razvoj medkulturnih kompetenc pri skupini slovenskih odraslih učečih se študentov, vpisanih v podiplomski magistrski poslovni program. Študija je uporabila longitudinalno zasnovano s kvantitativnimi podatki, zbranimi pred N=40 in po N=36 sprintu. HIIS je bil sestavljen iz inovativnih hibridnih učnih aktivnosti, izvedenih v obliki inventivnega učenja na podlagi primerov, ki je potekalo od januarja do februarja 2023. Študija je uporabila rubriko VREDNOST, anketni instrument, ki meri stališča, vrednote in znanja, povezana z medkulturnimi kompetencami, s 14 postavkami na Likertovi lestvici. Longitudinalna zasnova študije je omogočila primerjavo medkulturnih kompetenc pred in po intervenciji. Rezultati so pokazali povečanje v vseh kategorijah medkulturne kompetence, vključno s stališči (odprtost, radovednost), veščinami (komunikacija, empatija) in znanjem (pogled na svet in samozavedanje): stališča so se povečala s 30 % na 41,7 %, spretnosti so se povečale z 22,55 % na 41,7 %, znanje pa se je povečalo z 42,5 % na 58,3 %.

Ključne besede: medkulturne kompetence, odrasli učenci poslovnih ved, hibridni intervencijski program, sprintersko učenje, učenje na podlagi primerov

*Doba Business School,
Maribor,
svitlana.buko@gmail.com

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1 INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions are increasingly focusing on developing programs with a focus on intercultural competencies for their students, recognizing the significance of these competencies for business success in a globalized world (Bryman, 1997). These programs aim to help students develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to communicate effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds and to navigate and succeed in multicultural workplaces (Cavusgil, 1997; Banks, 2010). Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of developing intercultural competencies in students to prepare them for the challenges of the modern workplace (Deardorff, 2006).

Slovenia, like many other EU countries, recognizes the need to develop intercultural competencies in adult learners, particularly in the field of business. Intercultural business education in Slovenia has evolved significantly over the past few decades, reflecting the country's increasing engagement in the global economy (Hauptman Komotar, 2019). Different teaching and assessment methods exist across the country, including innovative experiential learning for adults. The purpose of this study is to explore the effectiveness of an innovative teaching method, namely, a hybrid intercultural intervention sprint (HIIS) in developing intercultural competencies in a group of adult business learners enrolled in a graduate-level business program in Slovenia. The study utilizes a sequential design to investigate the impact of the hybrid learning sprint on the participants' intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

Slovenia as the country has become more integrated into the European Union and the global economy, consequently, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of intercultural competencies for business success (Hauptman Komotar, 2019). This has led to the development of various intercultural business education programs and initiatives, including study abroad programs, intercultural training courses, and language programs (Hauptman Komotar, 2019). In addition, there has been an increasing emphasis on internationalization in higher education, with many universities in Slovenia. Overall, intercultural business education in Slovenia has evolved to reflect the country's changing business landscape and its increasing recognition of the importance of intercultural competencies for business success in a globalized world.

There are various approaches to teaching intercultural communication, including experiential learning, case studies, role-playing, simulation, cross-cultural encounters, and interventions (Baxter, 2000). Examples of educational interventions include targeted instructional strategies (Dzubinski, 2014), such as one-on-one tutoring or small group instruction as well as behavioral interventions, such as positive reinforcement or social skills, including intercultural skills (Bloom, 1965).

The hybrid learning format allows students to interact with instructors and peers in real-time while also providing opportunities for self-paced asynchronous learning. Hybrid learning refers to a pedagogical approach that combines traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning activities (Garrison, 2004). This approach combines online and in-person activities to create a dynamic and engaging learning experience (Kozlova & Zundel, 2013). It emphasizes the integration of technology to enhance learning experiences, offering flexibility within different forms of instruction to students. Hybrid teaching focuses on the instructional strategies employed by educators to facilitate effective learning; it includes pedagogical and methodological transformation, flexibility, and technological integration (Lu, 2020). Understanding these trends can assist educators and researchers in designing and implementing effective hybrid learning environments that optimize student learning experiences (Hodges et al., 2020).

The intercultural intervention sprint (HIIS) is designed to be intensive and immersive, providing adult students with opportunities to develop intercultural competencies through hands-on experiences with cases (Blake, 2013). The effectiveness of this approach has been

demonstrated in recent research studies, making it a promising teaching methodology for graduate-level business education (Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009). The aim of the intercultural intervention is to facilitate positive intercultural interactions by addressing and reducing misunderstandings, biases, and stereotypes that may hinder effective communication and collaboration. A common method used for delivering interventions is linked to the concept of “sprints”. Learning sprints consist of three phases: prepare, sprint and review. Sprint teaching is a teaching method that involves short and intensive bursts of learning, followed by a period of reflection and evaluation. This approach is particularly beneficial for adult business learners because it caters to their busy schedules and fast-paced work environment. Sprint learning is time-efficient, practical, and customizable to the learners' specific needs, making it an engaging and effective method for professional development. Research has highlighted the potential of sprint learning in various contexts, including workforce development (Levy, 2007).

The assessment of intercultural competency has been a subject of study for a long time, and as a result, there are many survey instruments available to measure it. The most common of these include the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI), and the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS). The N IDI is a widely used instrument that assesses intercultural sensitivity and competence (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003), while the CCAI measures four dimensions of cross-cultural adaptability: emotional resilience, flexibility/openness, perceptual acuity, and personal autonomy (Meyer, 1995). The CQS measures cultural intelligence, which is defined as the ability to adapt to different cultural contexts (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008), while the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) assesses individual differences in multicultural experience and adaptation. In addition to these, the Multicultural Competence Scale (MCS) and the Global Competencies Inventory (GCI) are also commonly used (Matsumoto, 2013). Finally, the VALUE rubric developed by Purdue University provides a comprehensive framework for assessing intercultural knowledge and competence in the areas of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors (AAC&U, 2009). These instruments provide a useful means of assessing intercultural competency and can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of intercultural education and training programs. The VALUE Rubric for Intercultural Knowledge and Competence provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and assessing intercultural competencies (AAC&U, 2009). It provides a useful framework for understanding and assessing these competencies and can be used to guide the development of intercultural education and training programs.

Consequently, the literature suggests that despite the growing attention paid to intercultural education, there is still a need for more research to determine the most effective approaches to designing and implementing intercultural interventions in the business curriculum (Machera, 2017). While the use of intercultural interventions in business education is becoming more prevalent, there is still much to learn about its impact. This research provides an example of the program implemented in Slovenia January-February 2023. The current study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of a hybrid intercultural intervention sprint in developing intercultural competencies in adult business learners enrolled in a graduate-level business program in Slovenia. The study utilizes a sequential design to investigate the impact of the intervention on intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills. The results will add to the research on intercultural interventions' effectiveness, especially in the Slovenian context.

1.1 Project: Hybrid Intercultural Intervention Sprint (HIIS)

The hybrid intercultural intervention sprint (HIIS) is an innovative six-week program designed to provide a total immersion experience for adult learners seeking to develop their intercultural competencies. Format: Hybrid, Value: 5 ECTS. Implementation with the second

year of MA level Business Degree Program Adult learners. The aim of the sprint is to equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively communicate and collaborate with people from diverse backgrounds in a globalized world. The HHS was implemented in a bi-lingual set up: in Slovenian and English. The program involves a combination of online and onsite lectures, focusing on the theoretical frameworks of comparative cultural analysis, conflict deconstruction, and preparation of the mitigation session for clients. The program begins with a set of online lectures that cover the theoretical frameworks of comparative cultural analysis and conflict behavior, both verbal and nonverbal. This is followed by onsite sessions where students engage in hands-on activities to review and practice these concepts.

Sprint teaching is a beneficial approach for adult business learners because it is time-efficient, focused, practical, customizable, and engaging. Sprint is structured as focused learning: teaching is focused on a specific topic or skill. This approach is particularly useful for adult business learners who need to acquire new skills quickly to address specific business challenges. By participating in this program, Slovenian business students learn to navigate and deconstruct verbal and non-verbal behaviors of business partners from different cultural backgrounds. They are exposed to a range of intercultural comparative frameworks that enable them to unpack conflicts and find solutions that are acceptable to all parties involved. By the end of the program, students were expected to have a deeper understanding of their own cultural biases and assumptions, as well as those of others.

The intervention in this study involved a hybrid learning approach that included a variety of activities designed to enhance intercultural competencies among adult learners in a graduate-level business program in Slovenia. The activities included onsite lectures (in Ljubljana and Nova Gorica), synchronous and asynchronous online discussions (forums set up in Moodle, Zoom sessions), intercultural business case studies, hybrid presentations-simulations, and hybrid role-playing based on the case scenarios. A hybrid intercultural intervention program for adult business learners is a comprehensive educational program that combines various elements of traditional classroom-based learning with online and interactive components to provide a highly effective and engaging learning experience for adult learners.

Adult learners had a block of theoretical input on cultural differences. Key prominent models were used to compare cultures and their values, beliefs, and behaviors in the input sessions: Lewis' Cultural Types (Lewis, 2006), Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions (Hofstede, 1980), Trompenaars' Seven Dimensions of Culture (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997), Hall's High and Low Context Cultures (Hall, 1976), and Erin Meyer's Culture Map (Meyer, 2014). In addition, proxemics and chronemics were introduced to students. Theoretical input informed learners about the fact that different cultures have different attitudes toward time, such as punctuality, the pace of life, and the importance of schedules (Lin, Zhang, & Zheng, 2017).

The HHS practical learning activities were structured around intercultural business cases. The case-based approach is a commonly used method in intercultural business education. It involves analyzing and discussing real-life situations or cases that illustrate the challenges and opportunities of doing business across cultures (Wang, 2007) These cases typically involve a range of intercultural issues, such as differences in communication styles, feedback strategies, management practices, and cultural values (Shattuck, 2005). Students are then asked to analyze the case, identify the key issues, apply theoretical frameworks, and discuss possible solutions or strategies for addressing intercultural challenges (Morse, 2003). This process encourages students to think critically about the complexities of intercultural communication and to develop their skills in analyzing and solving intercultural business problems. The case-based approach is particularly effective in intercultural business education because it allows students to apply theoretical concepts and models to real-world situations.

Overall, HIIS represents a unique and didactical approach to developing intercultural competencies among adult learners in the business context. The impact of HIIS was evaluated using the VALUE rubric, which measures intercultural competencies in terms of attitudes, values, and knowledge. The methodology and findings are described in detail in the following sections.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the sequential study - this methodology refers to a research approach that involves multiple data collection points with a shorter duration between them. A study was conducted to investigate the effects of the hybrid sprint on the intercultural competencies of adult students involved several steps. The research question: "To what extent, if any, does hybrid sprint improve the intercultural competencies of adult students?" The hypothesis was that interactive training would lead to significant improvements in the intercultural competencies of adult business learners.

The VALUE Rubric was used as a tool to assess intercultural knowledge and competence, consisting of 14 questions using a Likert Scale. Data collection involved administering the pre-test instrument before the intervention and the post-test instrument after the intensive four-week interactive training on intercultural competencies. The pre-test and post-test data sets were analyzed using appropriate statistical methods to determine whether there were significant changes in intercultural competencies after the intervention.

Respondents: The study involved a total of 40 adult learners who were enrolled in a graduate-level business program. Out of these, 80% were female, while the remaining 20% were male. The age range of the participants was between 23-51 years old, which suggests that the learners were mostly young and middle-aged adults. Regarding the nationality of the participants, the majority were Slovenians, accounting for 90% of the total participants. The remaining 10% of participants were international students from Bosnia, Russia, Macedonia, and Montenegro.

Research instrument: VALUE rubric was used for pre-test and post-test to measure differences in intercultural competencies, capturing changes in intercultural competencies over time of six weeks. Rubric consists of 14 questions, using a Likert Scale. The scale consists of a series of questions, and participants are asked to rate their agreement or disagreement on a scale, ranging from 1 to 6. The VALUE survey includes questions that aim to measure attitudes, skills, and knowledge in four areas: openness, curiosity, empathy, communication, worldview, and self-awareness.

Data collection process: The data collection process involved administering a pre-test instrument to the participants before the intervention to establish a baseline measurement of their intercultural competencies. This pre-test survey was conducted online using Google Forms, a web-based survey platform that allows the creation of customized online surveys. The survey was made available to the participants via a link that was uploaded to the Moodle platform.

Instructional period and format: Intensive 6-week interactive training on intercultural competencies was set up in the hybrid form (Onsite workshops and lectures, online Zoom meetings, Moodle async forum work, case studies, and role-play presentations).

After the HIIS, post-test data were collected from the participants to measure changes in their intercultural competencies. The post-test instrument evaluated the effectiveness of the sprint and compared the participants' intercultural competencies before and after the learning. The post-test survey was administered using the same online survey platform, Google Forms, as the pre-test survey. Participants were provided with a unique link to access

the survey, which was uploaded to the Moodle platform. This allowed participants to complete the survey at their convenience.

To analyze the pre-test and post-test data sets, the statistical analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The goal was to determine whether there were significant changes in intercultural competencies after the HIIS. The validity of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for knowledge, attitudes, and skills (pre and post), a statistical measure that evaluates the internal consistency of a survey instrument. This ensured that the survey instrument was measuring what it was intended to measure and that the results obtained were reliable (pre and post).

3 RESULTS

The results of this study indicate that the HIIS was effective in developing intercultural competencies of adult business learners in Slovenia. The HIIS had a statistically significant impact on participants' intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

Based on the results, there was an overall improvement in all three areas after the HIIS. In the higher category (very high degree): Attitudes increased from 30 % to 41.7 %, Skills increased from 22.55 % to 41.7%, and Knowledge increased from 42.5% to 58.3%.

Table 1. Attitudes pre and post intervention

	ATTITUDE			
	PRE		POST	
	FREQUENCY	%	FREQUENCY	%
somewhat low degree	1	2.5	0	0
somewhat high degree	7	17.5	3	8.3
high degree	20	50.0	18	50.0
very high degree	12	30.0	14	41.7

Source: author's research

The results showed a significant improvement in the participants' attitudes after the HIIS. Specifically, there was an increase in the highest category from 30 % to 41.7 % for attitudes, indicating a positive change in participants' perceptions towards other cultures. This increase indicates that the participants became more open and curious about other cultures. Openness refers to a willingness to explore and learn about other cultures, while curiosity involves an active interest and desire to understand those cultures.

Table 2. Skills pre and post intervention

	SKILLS			
	PRE		POST	
	FREQUENCY	%	FREQUENCY	%
somewhat low degree	2	5	1	2.8
somewhat high degree	10	25.0	5	13.9
high degree	19	47.5	15	41.7
very high degree	9	22.5	15	41.7

Source: author's research

Similarly, there was an increase from 22.55 % to 41.7 % in the highest category for skills, which suggests that the intervention helped participants to develop intercultural

communication skills. Specifically, the HISS appeared to have improved participants' empathy towards individuals from other cultures. Through the intervention, participants likely developed a greater ability to understand and appreciate the perspectives of individuals from different cultures, which allowed them to engage in more productive and meaningful verbal and non-verbal communication in the hybrid environment.

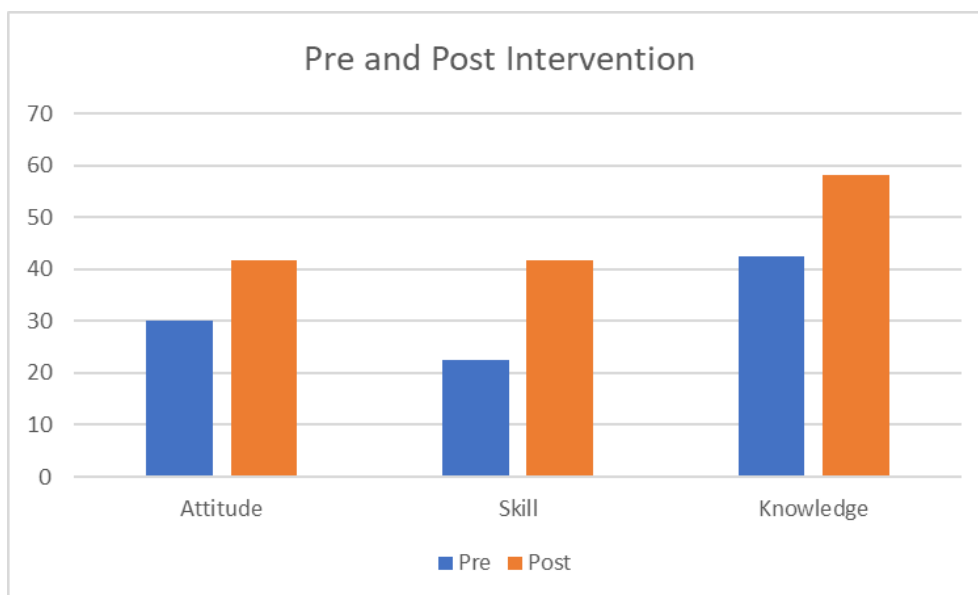
Table 3. Knowledge pre and post intervention

	KNOWLEDGE			
	PRE		POST	
	FREQUENCY	%	FREQUENCY	%
somewhat high degree	4	10.0	2	5.6
high degree	19	47.5	13	36.1
very high degree	17	42.5	21	58.3

Source: author's research

Moreover, there was a significant increase from 42.5 % to 58.3 % in the highest category for knowledge, which indicates that participants acquired a better understanding of other cultures and increased their intercultural knowledge. This increase is particularly noteworthy as it indicates that participants developed a better understanding of other cultures and gained insights into different worldviews.

Figure 1. Visual summary of pre and post: skills, attitudes, knowledge (combined in the highest category)



Overall, the findings show that participants had a significantly greater understanding of intercultural concepts, after the intervention. Furthermore, participants demonstrated an ability to apply their intercultural knowledge and skills in real-world situations (cases). There was a significant improvement in the participants' intercultural knowledge, as evidenced by their increased understanding of different cultural practices, beliefs, and values. The intervention also had a positive impact on the participants' attitudes towards intercultural interactions. They demonstrated a greater appreciation for cultural diversity, as well as an increased openness to learning from and working with people from different cultures.

The validity of the VALUE Survey tool was analyzed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which is a statistical measure used to determine the internal consistency and reliability of a survey instrument.

Table 4. Value rubric internal consistency and reliability (pre and post)

ATTITUDE					
PRE			POST		
Alfa Cronbach	Cronbach's alpha based on standardized items	number of elements	Alfa Cronbach	Cronbach's alpha based on standardized items	number of elements
.683	.700	4	.619	.689	4
SKILL					
PRE			POST		
.731	.740	4	.790	.794	4
KNOWLEDGE					
PRE			POST		
.787	.790	6	.775	.777	6

Source: author's research

A Cronbach's alpha value of pre-0.734 and post-0.728 was obtained, indicating the internal consistency of the survey. The use of the tool in this study provides confidence in the validity and reliability of the results obtained.

4 DISCUSSION

The sequential design of the study allowed for a comparison of intercultural competencies before and after the HIIS. The results showed that the participants self-assessed skill ratings increased from pre-learning to post-learning, indicating that they were able to recognize their own progress. The use of the VALUE rubric allowed for a comprehensive assessment of the impact of the intervention on different dimensions of intercultural competencies, providing valuable insights for the design of future intercultural programs for adults.

It is essential to note that student self-perspective is observed in this research. From the student's perspective, the effectiveness of the HIIS teaching format can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the hybrid nature of the learning, combining face-to-face interactions and online components, likely provided a well-rounded and immersive learning experience recognized by Slovenian adult learners. Secondly, the HIIS effectively incorporated practical activities, real-world scenarios, and interactive discussions, enabling adult students to apply their learning in a relevant and meaningful context, connecting to their prior work/life experience. Overall, the combination of these factors likely contributed to the perceived effectiveness of the HIIS in promoting intercultural competencies of adult students.

Well-structured hybrid learning activities used in HIIS may have provided opportunities for participants to practice and refine their communication skills, both through virtual interactions and in-person case-based learning activities. This may have helped participants develop a greater understanding of how to communicate effectively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, including how to use nonverbal cues and other communication strategies to build rapport and establish trust with individuals from diverse backgrounds.

The participants were able to acquire knowledge about cultural differences, practices, and norms, which in turn can help them navigate complex cross-cultural situations with greater ease and sensitivity at their workplace in Slovenia and abroad. HIIIS facilitated participants' self-awareness, enabling them to reflect on their own cultural biases and assumptions and develop a more nuanced understanding of intercultural interactions.

Finally, it could be suggested that enhancing the intercultural competencies of adult business learners in Slovenia is important and should be more integrated into the business curriculum. First, Slovenia, like many other countries, is becoming increasingly diverse, with individuals from different cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds living and working together. Developing intercultural competencies in adult learners can help promote a greater understanding and appreciation of cultural differences in Slovenia, which can lead to more effective communication and collaboration in the workplace in the Slovenian context. By enhancing intercultural competencies in adult business learners, Slovenia can improve its competitive edge in the global marketplace by producing a workforce that is well equipped to navigate the complexities of the modern business environment.

4.1 Limitations and recommendations for further studies

There are several limitations to this study that should be considered. First, the study was conducted on a relatively small sample size (N=40 before intervention and N=36 after intervention), which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The results may not be representative of the wider population of adult learners in Slovenia or other cultural contexts. Second, the study used a self-reported measure of intercultural competencies, the VALUE rubric, which may be subject to response bias. Participants may have provided socially desirable responses or overestimated their own competencies, leading to inflated scores on the post-test (since measurement was conducted within the instructional period). Finally, the study only focused on the short-term effects of HIIIS, with data collected immediately before and after the intervention (February 2023). It is unclear whether the effects of the intervention will persist over time or whether they will fade over time. To further enhance the understanding of the effectiveness of hybrid intercultural interventions, there are several research recommendations that could be pursued, including testing hypotheses on the larger sample and looking at the data related to the extent of the self-perceived competence improvements. Further research with larger sample sizes, control groups, and longer follow-up periods is needed to confirm the effectiveness of this type of learning format for adults.

CONCLUSION

This research study investigated the impact of HIIIS on the development of intercultural competencies among a group of Slovenian adult learners enrolled in a graduate-level MA business program. The sequential research design allowed for a comparison of intercultural competencies before and after the HIIIS, revealing an increase in every category (attitudes, skills, and knowledge) among participants after the intervention. The results showed an increase in every category of intercultural competency, including attitudes (openness, curiosity), skills (communication, empathy), and knowledge (worldview and self-awareness): attitudes increased from 30% to 41.7%, skills increased from 22.55% to 41.7%, and knowledge increased from 42.5% to 58.3%.

This study adds to our understanding of the impact of innovative teaching methods and pedagogies on the development of intercultural competencies of adult learners in the Slovenian context. Consequently, HIIS is effective for business adult learners: key findings highlight the positive impact of HIIS on self-perceived participants' attitudes, skills, and knowledge related to intercultural competencies.

Future educational methodology recommendations for graduate-level business programs could include the incorporation of hybrid intercultural intervention sprints, into the curriculum as an innovative and effective teaching design. This approach offers a flexible learning experience, promotes active learning, and provides opportunities for hybrid learning. It also allows students to apply theoretical concepts and models to real-world situations and develop their ability to work in multicultural teams and communicate effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. This is particularly relevant in today's globalized business environment, where the ability to communicate and work effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds is a key professional skill. Graduate-level business programs could benefit from incorporating hybrid sprints as a way to enhance their students' intercultural competencies and prepare them for the challenges of the modern workplace. Overall, this study highlights the value-added elements of innovative didactics in developing intercultural competencies among adult learners in business education in Slovenian context.

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