

Chapter 16

“Learning from One Another” eTwinning Project: A Model of an Intercultural Approach to Using ICT in Foreign Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Learning a foreign language (FL) entails more than attaining the mastery of a system of linguistic norms or the functional and pragmatic aspects of that language. It requires learning to adapt to different cultural norms. So, the challenge is to provide FL learners with opportunities to interact with people from other cultural and linguistic realities and re-focus the aims of FL learning to the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The introduction of information and communication technology (ICT) in education not only enhances the access to information but also enables intercultural contact among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, setting the conditions for the development of curriculum-based telecollaboration projects. The LOA eTwinning project presented in this chapter was implemented in the context of an action-research project aimed to introduce an intercultural approach to teaching English to raise pupils' motivation and challenge them to become more creative, more collaborative, and more autonomous.

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INTRODUCTION

The continuing evolution of information and communication technology (ICT) requires schools, which are no longer the privileged sources of knowledge, to combat the digital divide. It demands a model of teaching focused on digital literacies which can ensure the development of key competences for lifelong learning (European Commission, 2007) and prepare European citizens to work in today’s global economy. Schools play an important role in guiding their pupils in the maze of the World Wide Web and in developing their critical thinking and judgment to make the best out of these technologies. The digital divide does not reside solely in the lack of connectivity, it can also be measured by the level of educational and cultural capacity to use the Internet in an autonomous way (Castells, 2004: 319).

The didactic approach of teaching / learning of languages we are presenting in this chapter is based on a curricular integration of the eTwinning action, an action from the European Union e-learning plan of the Lifelong Learning Programme, which represents an opportunity to introduce intercultural contact in the teaching and learning process that cannot be neglected. We designed and implemented an eTwinning project we entitled “Learning from One Another” (LOA). It was based upon a multicultural partnership which involved schools from four different European countries: Czech Republic, Italy, Poland and Portugal in a telecollaboration sustained through computer-mediated communication (email and chat sessions) and through the project’s Twinspace. The aims of LOA project were the following:

- To foster the development of intercultural communicative competence;
- To raise students’ awareness towards the European dimension of citizenship;
- To enhance attitudes of curiosity, interest and respect towards linguistic and cultural diversity;

- To stimulate the development of communication skills, personal and social competences for lifelong learning;
- To increase students’ autonomy to use foreign languages to learn and communicate with European partners grounded on Intercultural Education principles and educational integration of ICT.

We will, thus, report on the results of this project that was carried out in school year 2008/2009 in a Portuguese secondary school in Sátão, a town located 20 km from the city of Viseu, in a geographical context where learners have very few chances to interact with people from other countries. The participants of this experience had never participated in any transnational project before. The data related to the impact of the experience presented here were collected through both qualitative and quantitative methods. All participants, students and teachers from the four partner schools, filled in a questionnaire to account on the impact of LOA project. We, also, collected emails, chat sessions and messages posted on the discussion forums of the project’s Twinspace by the Portuguese students, from November 2008 to June 2009, so as to assess the pedagogical impact of the strategy on students’ intercultural communicative competence.

BACKGROUND

The Internet has introduced new forms of interaction and learning environments. On the one hand, individuals can interact directly with the sources of information and knowledge and actively participate in its production. On the other, the Internet increases new processes of socialization and mobility in virtual multicultural and multilingual environments. For this reason, the potential of ICT for intercultural communication should be explored, particularly in the context of FL teaching (; Liaw & Bunn-Le Master, 2010; O’Dowd, 2010).

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