

## English Language as a Tool in Improving ICT and Collaborative Skills for Erasmus+ Internships

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### Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to introduce an effective English language preparation before taking part in Erasmus+ Internships. Firstly, the Erasmus+ project, which was run at Higher Secondary School for EU Administration in Prague, is briefly described. Secondly, the students and internship employers' reflections on the level of needed language, ICT and collaborative skills are presented. To collect qualitative data the methods of questionnaire, focus-group discussions and semi-structured interviews were applied. Finally, the model of English language lessons which effectively prepares students for Erasmus+ Internships with regard to current job market requirements is presented. The English language serves as a tool which enables students to communicate face-to-face in an office environment and both synchronously and asynchronously in an online environment. Moreover, the English language is used while practising collaborative skills. The simulation of real working situations in both school and online environments might contribute to better relationships between the students and their working colleagues and employers and broaden the students' working opportunities.*

### 1. Introduction

Without any doubts both students and employers who take part in Erasmus+ Project Mobility are full of expectations and doubts regarding the level of English language, computer skills and soft skills mainly including collaborative skills which are needed to accomplish the internship successfully. Also students' teachers feel responsibility for their students' flawless work experience. The whole Erasmus+ project team at Higher Secondary School for Administration of the EU (specialised in Legal Administration, Diplomatic Services, Human Recourses and Media Communication) in Prague asked the same questions before sending the students on a four-week internship to the United Kingdom and Ireland. Although the project team received a lot of useful information about e.g. hosting families, country laws and manners, there was a lack of exact information such as what kind of work skills and an English level are expected from the trainees. English teachers intuitively prepared a 32 lesson course, where the first third of time was spent on general everyday topics and situations, the second third included the mix of office and business English and the last third included presentations on life and culture in the UK and internships' destinations. The teachers, the students and the project team did their best to help the students be prepared for a foreign working and living environment. Accompanying persons (English language teachers) took the opportunities of visiting and observing the students at their working placements and also they had a chance to talk with their employers about their expectations and requirements concerning the trainees' skills. Based on feedback information we tried to improve and modify the English language preparation for the next year group of trainees.

### 2. Employees requirements for internship students' skills

The European Parliament and the Council adopted ECVET (European Commission for Vocational Education and Training) Placement Evaluation in 2009 whose purpose is to enable recognition of learners' achievements during periods of mobility by creating a structure, bringing a common language, and stimulating exchanges and mutual trust among VET providers and competent institutions across Europe. ECVET aims to support recognition of learning outcomes without extending learners' education and training pathways. [1] The ECVET Placement Evaluations contain the list of skills that trainees perform during their Internship and the level of fulfilment (totally, partly, not fulfilled, not possible to evaluate).

#### 2.1 Methods

To evaluate the effectiveness of an English lesson preparation we collected data from pre and post questionnaires, ECVET Placement Evaluations and the interviews with the employers and internship participants. Data were collected from 29 students at the age of 17 – 18, split into three groups according to their internship destinations (Dublin, Birmingham and Portsmouth). Three accompanying English language teachers visited and interviewed 18 employers. Table 1 shows the first three most

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students' anticipated worries and problems before leaving for the internship. The first three worries concerning their work placement have more answers than the rest seven worries concerning everyday non-working situations.

Table 1. Students' anticipated worries and problems

Anticipated worries and problems	Number of students' answers
I will not know what they will want from me	18
I will not be able to fulfil given tasks properly	14
I will not be able to communicate in case of any problems in a working environment	13

Table 2 presents the evaluation of the language preparation after 32 lessons. 16 lessons were taught at school, next 16 lessons were taught during a four-day out school stay in the countryside. The students evaluated each item on a five-point Likert scale, where number 1 means little and number 5 a lot. The highest points were assigned to specialized vocabulary, new vocabulary, consolidation of current vocabulary and oral communication. Writing and reading skills were evaluated the least.

Table 2. The evaluation of the language preparation – pre-questionnaire

In which areas do you think your language has improved during the language preparation?	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
Text comprehension	2	11	9	8	0	2.86
Listening	2	5	11	7	4	3.21
Communication – oral performance	0	7	3	10	9	3.72
Writing	3	6	10	9	1	2.97
Specialised vocabulary	0	0	8	6	15	4.24
New vocabulary	0	1	12	6	10	3.86
Consolidation of current vocabulary	0	4	8	9	8	3.72

In the post – questionnaire the students (who returned from their internships) were asked if the language preparation was beneficial to them. 59 % of the students pointed out correspondence and telephoning phrases, 24 % of the students mentioned specialized vocabulary and also 24 % of the students mentioned information about life and culture in the UK and Ireland. Less than 15 % of the students equally stated everyday vocabulary, phrases for expressing feelings and problems or information about previous year internship.

Based on data retrieved from ECVET Placement Evaluations sixteen students worked as workers in office administrative departments and fulfilled their tasks completely. Three students worked as front office workers, two students had problems with transferring incoming calls and one student with answering visitor's enquiries and handling phone calls. Six students worked with the internet and data processing, all of them fulfilled tasks completely. Two students handled mainly phone calls and both fulfilled tasks completely. Two students processed correspondence and both did not fulfill the task of using merge correspondence.

During the feedback interview the students were asked four questions. All 29 students' answers to the first question if the language preparation was sufficient was yes. The second question if the students used any specialized or new vocabulary more than 70 % of the students used email and telephoning phrases, office vocabulary and 35 % of the students used English idioms. The third question focused on skills which the students had learnt. The students' examples varied from technical skills such as using different Microsoft Office applications, Power Point Presentation, Outlook, and Spreadsheet or managing office devices to social skills e.g. working in teams, cooperating in online environment, solving problems, collaboration, getting oriented in a new environment or handling public transport. They also mentioned improving their soft office skills such as handling telephone calls and correspondence. Finally, the students were asked to mention activities they can manage without any difficulties after the internship. All of them mentioned the improvement in using English in different situations, more than 50 % of the students stated the adaptation to a new environment and work in an office. All of them mentioned the ability to rely on their own or on their classmates and be able to cooperate in different working or everyday situations.

The feedback interviews with the employers proved that the most expected requirements from trainees are the ability to work in a multicultural team, be willing to learn, not to be afraid of asking the

questions and have good computer skills. Apart from using Microsoft Office applications, the students were expected to communicate and cooperate synchronously on the telephone and the Skype and asynchronously through emails, Facebook or mobile applications.

### 3. Effective English language lessons

Based on analysed data we have decided to prepare an English language course for future trainees on three principles. 1. Office communicative situations, 2. Team work aimed at cooperation and collaboration, 3. The use of software, internet and mobile application. To increase the effectiveness of the English preparation lessons, the best solution should be to implement all three principles into each lesson. To support real office communication situations we have made a list of the most used skills, which the trainees used during their previous internships:

#### 3.1 Office communication situations:

a) *A work interview*: ask questions, express motivation and expectations, talk about work experience and education, and formulate inquiries properly.

b) *Handling office telephone calls*: start, lead and end the call appropriately, provide information during the call, obtain the required information, handle requests of clients, record the results of the call, and handle the phone records as required, transfer incoming calls.

c) *Office correspondence*: create and send e-mails, reply to previous e-mails, use merge correspondence, keep an evidence of leaving and incoming mail, write a message.

d) *Front desk working*: accept clients, announce clients, provide information, answer visitors' enquires.

e) *Office socializing*: meeting visitors, making arrangements, postponing arrangements, showing a visitor around, giving directions

Office and business English vocabulary, phrases and idioms should be taught by means of simulation and role-play encouraging general oral fluency or training students for specific situations, especially where they are studying for ESP [2]. During the lessons we used both paper and social media resources. There are great examples of real office English on the internet such as: [www.talkenglish.com](http://www.talkenglish.com), or [Anglo-Link](http://Anglo-Link) on [youtube.com](http://youtube.com).

#### 3.2 Team work aimed at cooperation and collaboration supported by ICT

As the technologies play a critical role in supporting the cooperative and collaborative process among team members [3] a project-based learning should be a part of an English language course. Students are divided into teams of three students and they can choose a platform for sharing and publishing the content such as asynchronous Wiki, Facebook, Google Documents or Weblogs or synchronous Skype, Vibre or FB chat. Each team is asked to prepare a Power Point Presentation accompanied with a text document focused on practical and useful information related to internship's destination. Students can search, select, organize and present information about places of interests both inside and outside the city, they can look up information about public transport such as to find connections between their host families, work placements and places of interests or shopping and entertainment facilities and mobile phone operators. They can compare the facts by means of spreadsheets or graphs. While working on a project students can practise different collaborative skills, which are the certain aspects of behaviours that help students to work together and operate in learning processes.

### 5. Conclusion

This paper presented outcomes collected from Project Erasmus+ Mobility, and the learning context is critical to outcomes. The author does not make great claims about the generality of the results. Nevertheless, the findings from this paper might provide insight into requirements for thriving internships. In conclusion, we hope that the examples of activities and the outlined model of an English language course for trainees will help to improve not only English language skills, but also computer and collaborative skills. Skills, which are highly evaluated and required by employers in the UK and Ireland.

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