



# Project-Based Learning for Teaching a Course in European Union Institutions

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## Abstract

*The purpose of the present paper is to look at reasons why using project-based learning for a course in EU Institutions destined for students in the third year at the Translators and Interpreters section could be useful. First of all, it looks motivating, as the course otherwise can be regarded as a series of laws and rules, together with institutions that have their role in the European Union, together with policies that could be of interest to them. Students can be given tasks to search for certain information, since the main purpose of the course is to allow them to know what sort of information they can search for within these institutions. Their rights can also be found, together with opportunities for their profession. Students will be asked to look for and apply information to their situation and opinions. Project-based learning is supposed to help them realize the practical aspect of the information they can access on various sites, especially on the EU portal. Interactivity, motivation, preparation for everyday life and professional life can be reasons why project-based learning is the best approach. These students all study English as a main language, so it would be useful for them to realize with respect to their minor language what institution they could translate for.*

**Keywords:** *Translators, interpreters, citizens, rights, policies*

## 1. Introduction

Maintaining students active and motivated during the courses of lectures is one of the main goals and concerns of university teachers throughout the world. Students expect interaction with their teacher, and also to express their own opinions regarding various topics related to the lectures. This was what the students wanted and voiced their opinions in favour of when offering feedback for the course in European Union and Its Institutions which was held by the author of the present paper for the first time during the academic year 2022-2023. Students appreciate the interactivity offered by a course, both among students and among students and the teachers. As a result, the author of the present paper has thought that methods to maintain the students active during the course were a must. Asking for their opinion every now and then, for example, during the first course, the students could be asked about a definition they would give to the European Union, based on what they know so far. Afterwards, the teacher can bring to their attention several definitions of the European Union, in order to show them that the course can still bring insight to them, and that they do not know everything about the European Union yet. As an example, source [1] mentions the following possible definitions of the EU: a supranational or an international organization, a stage, a federation, and a confederation. Students can be given as a task to reflect on which definition they would choose and why, this task, of course, requiring a bit of research into features of the EU that support the respective definition, as well as looking up the terms enumerated. Bringing in something new can be a strategy to maintain the interest of the students, and discussing with them can help them realize that the course does follow its purpose, namely to complete their knowledge. Another way to maintain the students' attention would be to allow them to work in pairs or in groups in order to research and answer a question related to the European Union and its institutions. Generally, the author of the present paper has noticed that the students tend to feel safe when discussing with a colleague about a task, and asking for advice. The students discuss homework during the breaks and help one another, since this particular group of students, at the specialization Translation and Interpretation with the Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages, Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest, are most of all not from Bucharest, the city where the University is found. They are from all over Romania, and they tend to form a unitary group since they live together at the same hostel and frequent the same courses and seminars. Some of them prefer to be with their friends in the same seminar groups as well. In this particular situation,



students can be expected to enjoy working together on projects as well, not only simple homework involving quick research on the EU websites. In this case, the collaborative learning and team spirit can be understood as natural, as students tend to stick together, helping one another to go through the moments when they need help with their courses and seminars' activities. What is more, the course the European Union and Its Institutions seems, if we ignore activities that can be done in class, a bit dry and fixed, thus not open for any creative work. It is expected to learn about rules, organization and legislation regarding the way the institutions work, and also regarding what is expected of those professional translators or translators in training programmes, as well as interpreters, to do for the various institutions. Laws are seen as simply given information, which can be checked and remembered, yet students need to develop various skills, not just to learn information by heart or simply know where to look for it. As students of Translation and Interpretation, it is expected for these students to be interested in those institutions dealing with translation and interpretation, and with the types of documents and text genres that they are dealing with in translation and interpretation, function of the specificity of each institution.

The course aims to show these students that learning about fixed notions, rules and laws, as well as politics, and the activity of institutions does not need to be boring. They will not have to learn by heart and they will not only be given abstract notions. They will understand the way their everyday lives can be influenced by various decisions taken at supranational level. For example, values such as multiculturalism, which include respect and understanding for members of other cultures that have a different lifestyle and mindset, is promoted at the level of the EU. Minority rights are also part of the values promoted at EU level. The students will also understand how policies can change their lifestyle. If the EU did not include policies related to minority rights and multiculturalism, then they would not live in a society influenced by these values. They would not have environmental care concerns either. They would not study certain foreign languages if they were not promoted by the language policy at EU level. Their university curricula would not be structured on a period of three years for Bachelor's degree, following the Bologna system. All of these can be subjects of interactive discussions and group or pair work. Students tend to think about the practical side or practical application of the theoretical notions they gain in their university studies. They are very concerned about the practical skills that they can acquire during their university years, since they are eager to get hired and start successful work as professionals in a domain that they feel very much attracted to and which they have chosen to study for their Bachelor's degree.

Since the European Union portal [2] is the main site for updated information regarding the EU institutions, where students can find out everything they need to know, once they are aware of the opportunities given to them, both as translators and interpreters and as citizens of a country which is part of the EU, it is beneficial to create activities for students so that the course does not remain dry and, ultimately, not really practical. The EU portal website will open for the students the perspective related to the institutions' functioning, their rules, their activities, to the EU policies structured on a vast array of domains, as well as to the various opportunities for trainings ensured by the Directorate-General for Translations, an institution which is expected to be of particular interest for the students in the European Union and Its Institutions course, having in view the domain of their Bachelor's degree. The European Union's values and principles are also present on the EU portal website, and students can become aware of the status of their own country within this supranational organization which is the EU. However, just reading and browsing through the information is, by no means, enough. Generally, when we resort to browse a site we do so once we have a problem, and a question, and search there for answers. As an example, if we want to go on a trip abroad, we ask ourselves whether the country is in the EU or not, and if yes, as well as if no, we need to look up what documents we need to have with us, as well as where to go in order to obtain a passport, visa, and other documents to ensure that we have a smooth trip through the customs. We also look up our rights in the respective country, the period of time we are allowed to stay, and, if we go for an academic event such as a workshop or a conference, or for university study purposes, we need to be aware of what we are going to need for our stay, so that everything is covered, including health policy, money resources, clothes fit with the climate, and so on.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

When we start, as teachers, to lecture a group of students, we need to understand, first of all, the needs of the respective group of students. Thus, for this particular group, taught by the author of the present paper for the one semester the course was planned in the curricula, the interaction with the



teacher and also among them was significant. The teacher was also concerned with the level of knowledge these students had about politics and the EU. From the discussions, it became clear they were beginners. Adapting the course to their interests represented by their future professions, translation and interpretation, was also an aspect to take into account. The discussions and tasks would include some usual questions about the EU, the role of its institutions, but in the end consequences regarding their future professions, as well as facilities offered, were supposed to be mentioned. Translations also occupy an important place at the level of EU institutions. It was considered important for the teacher to make students aware that they should know the official languages of the EU in order to know what advantages they may have if they decide to apply to work for one of the institutions.

All of these notions can be fixed better, in the opinion of the author of the present paper, if students are discovering them through doing tasks. The tasks offer them a question, or a problem, which is likely to appear throughout their lives as translators and interpreters, such as the way GDPR could apply in their job, regarding preserving safely the sensitive data of their clients. Students may also be asked which policy they consider the most relevant for themselves, personally, and most beneficial for their country. They may also be asked which institution of the EU they would choose to work for and why, considering mainly the text genre and terms they may need to know. It may not be only the text genre they may have to deal with, but also they may need some background knowledge regarding the domain, such as the domain of Law or Economics. Brochures for informing the EU countries' citizens may be easier to translate, since they are mostly part of popular science, and, thus, meant to be accessible to the general public. These brochures may deal with health or environmentalist policies, for example.

From the needs analysis of this particular group of students, we can conclude that the following can be relevant in order to teach them: Engagement in Language Learning, Project-Based Learning, and Translation. The last one, Translation, does not need to be followed as a skill throughout the course, since the BA programme includes, in the curricula, enough subjects where they can practice these skills already. However, the students could be explained that the online databases such as IATE which they are recommended to use for their Terminology course, and for their seminar called Glossaries, where they are taught how to prepare a glossary that could help them when translating documents in a certain domain, come from an initiative of the EU. These Romanian students are all learning English as a foreign language for their major specialization, and a second, or minor foreign language of their choice, such as German, Spanish or French. The course in EU and Its Institutions is, thus, expected to help them with their knowledge of specialized terms regarding the EU, to some extent, as well, next to the background knowledge promised by the very title of the course.

According to source [3], the engagement in learning refers to motivating the students, having as results their paying attention in class, their solving their assignments and their feeling stimulated to answer the questions given by the teacher. Source [3] also emphasizes the idea that "students feel relaxed, energized, joyous in their learning." This engagement in language learning can lead to students feeling that they are truly at the centre of the teaching process. The teacher can help them organize themselves and lead them to both learn actively and to enjoy these activities. Once the students are given a lecture where the teacher does all the talking, they tend to get lost in their own thoughts or to chat with their nearby colleagues. The main goal in the teaching process is that of maintaining the students' attention. One method is for the teacher to ask them questions now and then, to check if they have followed until that point. Another method is to give them a short quiz at the end of each lecture, which would motivate students to remain attentive and to take notes throughout the lecture with the main ideas and concepts. However, a more efficient method is that of allowing students to cooperate with their colleagues in order to find the answer to a problem.

An even better solution to the problem, faced by the teacher, in such situations, when they teach a course, could be, for the students, to reinforce their knowledge gained during the course through project-based learning, which can be abbreviated as PBL, and which "is an active student-centred form of instruction which is characterised by students' autonomy, constructive investigations, goal-setting, collaboration, communication and reflection within real-world practices" [4]. The specificity of project-based learning is that it "allows students to learn by doing an applying ideas" [5].

Learning by doing, as opposed to passive listening to lectures, is understood as more efficient by Glasser's pyramid [6]. At the basis of the pyramid, Glasser situates the most important skills, which are expected to be gained by the students, and which are the following: "explain, summarize, classify, structure, define, generalize, elaborate, test and illustrate" [7], activities which imply "the use of active learning methodologies" [7]. At the very basis of the pyramid, students should be able to teach others or, in the case of the project-based learning, to explain what they have understood to their colleagues.



This is a good exercise to remember 90% of the information acquired during the EU course in our case, through teaching the others. According to the pyramid [7], and its immediately next level, students tend to remember a percentage of 80% of what they do. Here we can include the activities recommended during the course. At the next level [7], we can see that students remember as much as 70% of what they discuss with the others. This is why discussions can be seen as significant during a course. Obviously, this does not mean that the teacher should always, during all the courses, let students do all the work. The teacher can and should lecture, yet at some intervals the teacher can stop and allow the students to express themselves and interact during activities together, in order to fix the notions just learned. One of the advantages is that the knowledge acquired is reinforced and, in a way, already attained right on the spot, without them needing to review the notes and decipher the information later on while on their own. Even if they study together with colleagues, it may be more difficult to grasp some notions in the absence of the teacher. During this time, instead of their going over the notes in an attempt to understand the subject, the students can work on the exercises and assignments given by the teacher. Some tasks are meant to be done in pairs or groups, while others are also meant to be done individually. In this way, the evaluation process can be done in such a way as to prevent situations where some students may not work as much as other members of the group. According to the learning pyramid [7], only a percentage of 20% is memorized by the students from what they hear, in our case during the lecture. Judging by this, we can notice why interactive learning is the best option. Otherwise, “the use of passive learning methodologies is often associated with the neglect of the strengthening of certain skills, such as oral expression, creativity, the courage to face new challenges, the search for personal goals, self-improvement, critical spirit and the acceptance of external criticism, or teamwork, among others” [7].

Project-based learning can be applied to the course by devising activities where the students search for a question regarding the functioning of the EU institutions. First, the teacher can give the students a presentation of the institutions, and afterwards they can go for an in-depth study by working together in groups. For instance, the students can be asked, based mainly on source [8], what the policy-making EU institutions are, and to offer a brief explanation of the role of each of them. In order to answer this question, the students will collaborate in groups, then the result will be a presentation in Powerpoint for each group. The students will develop not only their search for information skills, but also their presentation skills. Powerpoint slides can help students present their ideas briefly and concisely. Its use can become part of project-based learning, as students are supposed to “gather information from a variety of sources and synthesize, analyze, and derive knowledge from it” [9]. Working together with other students can be considered safe and easier, and it can also be used as an occasion to test the students’ team-working skills. Such skills are at high price now, especially in education promoted by the EU and in any professional fields of activity. It is a well-known fact that employees at any workplace need to collaborate in order for the activities to go on smoothly and efficiently.

### **3. Results**

Learning can be more efficient when it is fun and when the students get actively involved in the process. Not only do they get to make use more efficiently of the notions learned, but they also get the chance to see how this course can get to help them in real life, both professional and everyday. They learn how they can search for information, and where, as well as what type of information can be available for the regarding the EU and its institutions, as well as policies, which can give them rights and opportunities. Students, by the end of the course, will understand how the EU can create the lifestyle they lead today or, at least, some of its aspects. They will get to grasp the notion of “ideology” and realize that all aspects in life can be controlled, to some extent, by the powerful elites at a certain moment. Even some topics chosen for literature and the arts are under the influence of ideology, since this is the reason why those novels regarding minority rights, or women’s rights, and, more generally, human rights, for instance, get actively promoted and achieve worldwide fame.

A successful course can be a combination of the teacher’s lecturing, which should be focused on making clear for students the main notions, and then allowing the students to express themselves through creating projects, having the notions reinforced through working together with their colleagues, as well as developing additional skills, especially team work skills, which are considered crucial by employees nowadays.

### **4. Discussion**

The method of listening to lectures during class is not only boring for students, but it can also be inefficient with respect to their results. Students, at least within the University of Civil Engineering



Bucharest, feel tempted to skip lectures if they have a handbook after which they can learn. Sometimes, the teacher needs to “compete” with the handbook, by creating an attractive course for the students, which, in the present case, can apply very well. The author of the present paper, since it was her first time this academic year to teach this course, did not have the time to write a textbook for the students. Some of them did ask about a textbook, but she tried to compensate by offering them schemas and materials from the Internet, as they were available in electronic format and were easier to access than books in print format. The focus on activities during the course could compensate very well for the classic expectation to have a handbook for each and every course. This absence of a handbook was, however, replaced by an interactive learning environment, where students could use the internet and their technological gadgets (smartphone, laptop or tablet). Technology could provide students with a familiar environment, and with exercises useful in real life situations, where they need to look up information regarding citizens’ rights in the EU, research opportunities, educational and language policies, as well as what the Directorate General of Translation can offer them. Naturally, the risk of allowing students to work together during activities and wishing to maintain them active during the courses through tasks can be that of repeating a type of task in a monotonous manner, during several courses. This is why the teacher needs to take care to bring about variation into the tasks, concerning their type, not just the content. Sometimes, students can be asked to answer a question on the spot, other times they can be asked to present their findings in front of the class, in pairs or in groups, other times, they can solve an individual homework, while still other times they can be asked to work in groups during class and find solutions to a problem through research. They can also be asked to argue for or against a certain perspective, or even to propose a policy, so that it can be clear to the teacher that students have understood what type of issues can be present in EU policies. They can also be asked to make a simulation regarding the steps proposing and then accepting and implementing a policy. Once the notions are clear and they know where to get their information from, the activity can be both instructive and fun. Students enjoy bringing their own contribution and feeling creative. Classes can become, in this way, accessible and students can understand why some amount of theory can be useful, when they get to rely on it and use it in their practical activities.

## 5. Conclusions

The course EU and Its Institutions, through its approach to teaching and learning, focuses on interactivity and collaboration with both teachers and other students. While acquiring the main notions is a significant aspect followed throughout, the students can gain additional insights into the way the EU and its institutions can impact our present-day lifestyle, and why we are what we are, due to the values and lifestyles promoted. Practice reinforces theoretical knowledge and brings a concrete dimension to it.

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