



The “Sign up and Connect” eTwinning project: an intercultural approach to teaching English as a foreign Language

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Abstract

Learning a foreign language does not only involve the mastery of a system of linguistic norms but it also requires intercultural understanding, the competency to see the world in a different perspective. Taking this into consideration, foreign language education has a crucial role to play in fostering the use of English as an intercultural language to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. The problem is that most European foreign language learners have very few opportunities for 'real' intercultural contact.

The eTwinning action from the European Union elearning programme represents an opportunity for intercultural contact as it cuts geographical distances through integrating ICT tools in the classroom. The integration of eTwinning appears to be the key to achieve the major goals for a life-long education of the twenty-first century as reported to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century by Jacques Delors (1996) which is based on four pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be.

In this paper we will present the results of a successful curricular integration of an eTwinning project which is being developed as a teaching strategy grounded on intercultural interaction mediated by ICT tools between students and teachers from different countries.

As eTwinning project is based on the principles of collaborative and cooperative learning, it is expected to introduce changes in the teaching process and to the design of a learner-oriented curriculum for the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence. In parallel, it will have an impact on the learning process as it will engage learners in learning and using the foreign language to communicate with students from other cultures to accomplish a set of collaborative tasks.

1. Introduction

Integrated in the Commission political strategy of multilingualism, 2008 European Year of Intercultural Dialogue was aimed at enhancing understanding among European citizens so as to strengthen peaceful relationships based on the recognition of Europe as a space characterized by a plurality of cultures and languages. Fostering the mastery of foreign languages is a priority of the European Commission. In this respect, the Commission stresses the benefits of becoming plurilingual and issued a series of recommendations in this matter. The issue at stake is that the mastery of languages - mother tongue + 2 foreign languages- has become a passport that allows citizens to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers and the key that opens the doors to work, study and travel across Europe. This commitment has been reinforced since the issue of the White Paper on Education and Training - Teaching and Learning - Towards the Learning Society (1995) and Barcelona European Council held on 15 and 16 march 2002. It is currently supported by the European Commissioner for Multilingualism and the Lisbon Strategy. A successful example of the EU's policies to promote plurilingualism is Lingua Programme implemented in 1990, later integrated into Socrates Programme in 1995. The current renewed Lifelong Learning Programme exemplifies the European Commission's interest in promoting the European population's awareness for the diversity of European languages



and cultures and in encouraging school's communities to learn foreign languages. But how can the education systems in each country of Europe respond to this challenge? Several scholars [1] [2] [3] [4] have been addressing the issue by exploiting a new paradigm in the field of language teaching didactics by claiming that teaching a language should be aimed at intercultural communication.

An intercultural approach to learning a foreign language

Learning a foreign language (FL) and communicating with someone from another cultural background do not only involve the mastery of a system of linguistic norms but it also requires intercultural competence which relies on the ability to consider different visions of the world and to see the world in a different cultural perspective. These competences imply the discovery of the 'self' confronted with others, which in its turn entails the risk of losing face and lowering self-esteem. As Robert Gardner [5] observed: "As such, one's conception of the "self" and their willingness to open it up to change, as well as their attitudes toward the other community, or out-groups in general, will influence how well they can make this material part of their behavioural repertoires."

This brings a pedagogical implication for foreign language teaching as it should aim at a more comprehensive perspective of communicative competence which includes developing personal and social competences as described in the Common *European Framework of Reference for Languages* [6]. So the challenge is to provide FL learners with opportunities to interact with people from different cultural and linguistic realities, to use languages as bridges to cross borders and to fully take profit of intercultural communication not to become mere 'clones' of native speakers but to become 'intercultural speakers' [7]. In this perspective, learning English as a FL has to constitute itself as a social, political and ethical enterprise aimed at fostering the development of the ability to live and grow in a multicultural environment and the breaking down of cultural prejudices. This can be attained through true acquaintance and intercultural interaction by meeting the four Contact Hypothesis conditions of "equal status between the groups in the contact situation; the shared pursuit of common goals; the perception of common interests; and institutional support for the contact" [8]. To conclude, teachers should provide learners with relevant intercultural contact experiences and devise motivational strategies that can effectively enhance their motivational patterns to learn with and about others and live harmoniously with them because: "What people think, believe and feel affects how they behave" [9]

eTwinning the key to authentic intercultural dialogue

For schools which are located in areas where learners have very few chances to interact in a foreign language with people from other countries, the eTwinning action from the European Union lifelong learning programme represents an opportunity for intercultural contact as it cuts geographical distances through the pedagogical integration of ICT tools in the classroom. This action was launched in 2005 with the main objective to offer an intercultural network of collaborative work between schools from different countries of Europe based on the use of ICT communication and publishing tools while providing opportunities to strengthen the European dimension in their curriculum. Therefore, by integrating eTwinning in the classroom, foreign teachers are opening a door to the world cultures and languages, giving their pupils the chance to be part of an intercultural learning community.

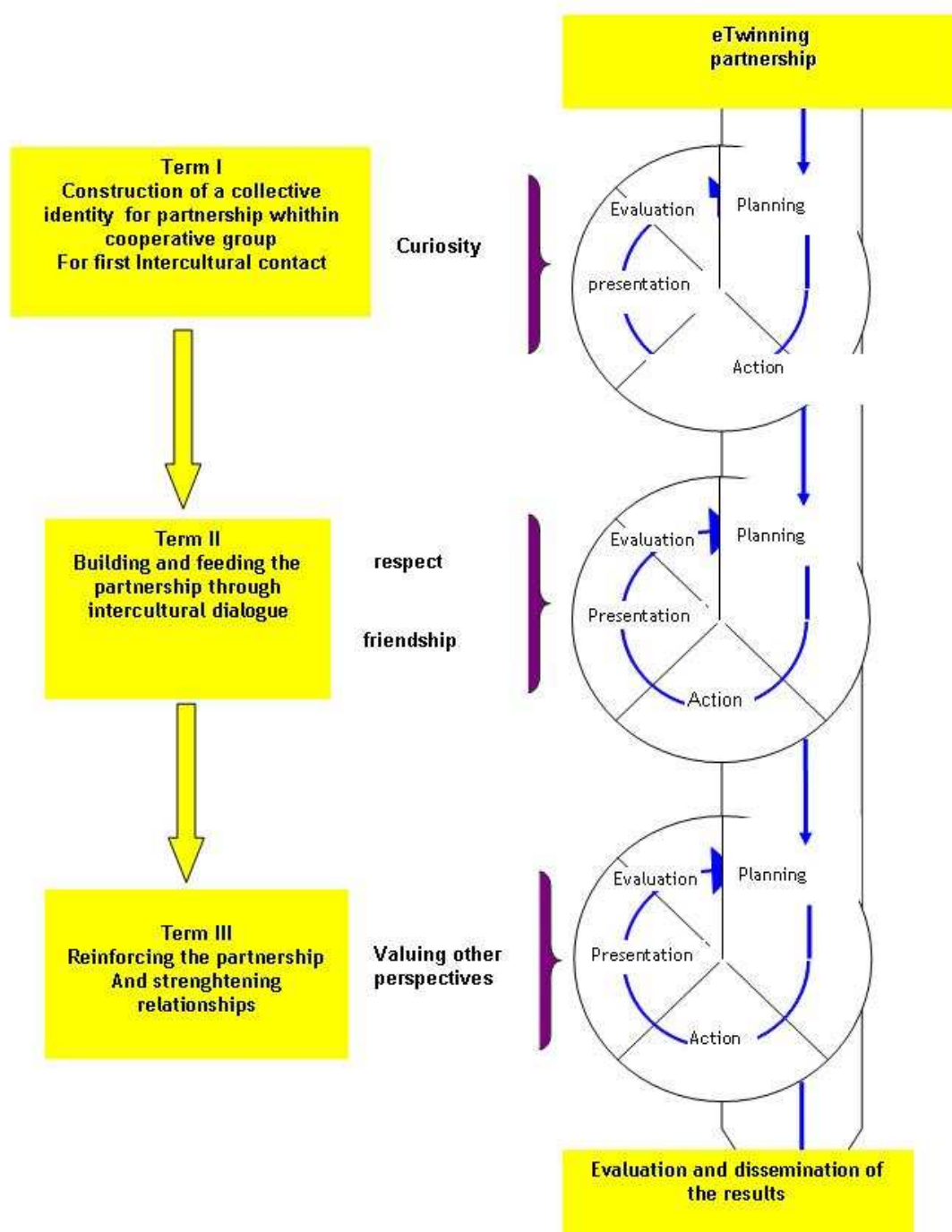
eTwinning provides project members with a private Twinspace, a safe virtual learning environment to which only students and teachers who are registered by teacher coordinators can have access to. As eTwinning project is based on the principles of collaborative and cooperative learning, it is expected that it will lead to:

- Change in the teaching process;
- The promotion of an effective intercultural communication based on collaborative transnational team work
- The improvement of foreign language communication competences
- The enhancement of linguistic and cultural awareness
- The increase pupils and teachers' motivation to use and learn other languages.



The Sign up and Connect eTwinning project

The Sign Up and Connect eTwinning Project emerged from the agreement between four European teachers from Czech Republic, Italy, Poland and Portugal to use the eTwinning elearning platform to develop collaborative project work. This project is being developed as a teaching strategy in regular English lessons since the beginning of school year 2010-2011. After the project was approved by each National Support Service, the teachers presented it to their classes, parents as well as to their school board and language departments to be included in the Schools' Activity Plan. Teaching strategies, learning activities and teaching materials were discussed and published on the project's twinspace. The Project methodology followed the same model as the former "LOA: Learning from One Another" eTwinning project implemented in school year 2008-2009 (see figure 1). Inspired by Vera Maria Candau [10] and Micheline Maurice [11]'s models of intercultural approach, we planned three stages.



Scheme adapted from Silva (2008 and 2003).

For each stage a series of motivational strategies have been devised, following Dörnyei's [12] instructional model to promote effective self-regulated learning which comprise the four dimension presented by the author:



- creating the basic motivational conditions with the creation of cooperative groups;
- generating initial motivation by arousing their attention with their introduction to ICT4 project;
- Maintaining and protecting motivation through the production of creative materials and the intercultural contact which was fostered through the intercultural communication and
- Encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation by means of project work dissemination and groups' reflection on the impact of the project's activities.

At each stage, every eTwinning group is expected to develop a joint product on a chosen curriculum-based topic through intercultural interaction and collaborative work with their eTwinning partners and to present it orally to the class. During the project, students become ethnographers and lead micro ethnographic studies through inquiries by sending questionnaires by email, by participating in online forum discussion and exchanging messages on blogs and posting the results of their researches on the twinspace. In the end the students are asked to reply a questionnaire on the impact of the project in their learning in order to check if the objectives are being addressed.

Our expectation is that, in line with the Contact Hypothesis, this experience of intercultural contact among students with equal status- as FL language learners – who share common goals will increase their motivation to learn and use the FL and promote the development of the ability to decentre and re-interpret their own and others' world views.

Students' perspectives on the impact of the project

In January and April 2011, students from the participating schools were invited to answer a questionnaire about the learning outcomes and the impact of the project posted on the project's twinspace's discussion forum. The messages published by the students show that the Sign up and Connect project met the objective to create a supportive and collaborative environment for the accomplishment of authentic tasks and authentic intercultural communication. In their answers students revealed:

- Interest in getting to know each other better: "I also want to meet our partners, their towns, schools and cultures"[13];
- Desire to become friends: "Thanks to this project I above all met some new friends" [14];
- Appreciation of each other's works: "I liked Complimentary Visions work a lot. Congrats!" [15] ;
- knowledge about their partners culture and appreciation about their mother tongue: "Of course I learnt some Portuguese words and I must say that it's beautiful language" [16];
- Satisfaction with their achievements and the results of the collaborative work: "I learnt to work in the group and find out that together we can achieve more" [17];
- More engagement and responsibility in the learning process: "In group I find to be very good, my role in the group is very big and significant. I'm trying to make as many jobs and all the best" [18];
- More confidence in using the FL: "The participation to the project brought advantages like the improvement of our English communication skills, the great opportunity for us to talk with other pupils with ages similar to ours" [19];
- Being more aware of their own cultural heritage: "We also learned a lot about our country and our partners mentioned things we didn't know and had to research about them" [20]
- More motivation for the English classes "This project is also a good way to we be motivated with English subject" [21].

eTwinning partners have also reported that participating in the project has helped them improve ICT skills and made the classroom communication more relevant to their lives as they have been interacting with other teenagers eager to know what they would have to say and learn from them.

Conclusion

These perceptions show that eTwinning project has had a positive impact as it contributed to the increase of students' motivation in its various variables: students developed more favorable attitudes and beliefs towards learning languages and towards linguistic diversity; their linguistic self-confidence



improved in the target language; and they reported to have improved their communication skills in the target language.

In short, if we consider the fact that learners are at a disadvantage because they have very few opportunities for interpersonal communication in the target language, eTwinning must be acknowledged as an effective option for learners to meet and learn with and about students of their ages, may they live in distant countries. Moreover, contact with other world views will result in the development of intercultural communicative competence which will allow students to overcome ethnocentric perspectives of other cultures. The integration of eTwinning appears to be the key to achieve the major goals for a life-long education of the twenty-first century as reported to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century by Jacques Delors [22] which is based on four pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be.

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- [15] Quote from students' replies to the evaluation questionnaire posted on the project's twinspace
- [16] idem
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