NON-FOR-LESL: Non Formal Learning Can Prevent Early School Leaving

Giovanni Caruso
Pixel (Italy)

Abstract

NON-FOR-LESL project is challenged by the fight against early school leaving (ESL) and its aim is to cooperate with EU components to achieve the objective set in the EU 2020 Strategy by reducing ESL to less than 10%. With this purpose, NON-FOR-LESL fits both with Erasmus+ aims and with 3 main targets of the EC, that is the initiative
- for the opening up of education through the use of OER, recommendation,
- for the validation of non-formal and informal learning and
- for the acquisition of key competence and transversal skills for the new work-force to meet the market's needs.

NONFORLESL project started on December 2014 for a duration of 24 months. During this period, a great emphasis will be given for implementing an OER. This tool will be developed by the partnership and then tested by each one of them in secondary schools (chosen according specific criteria). Students and teachers, on voluntary basis, will use it for unveiling non formal and informal learning potential.

The overall structure of the project activities is a logical sequence of steps. The six main ones will be the centre of the six Intellectual Outputs leading towards the following outcomes:
1) a Comparative Study Analysis investigating the validation of formal, non formal and informal learning paying attention also to the collection of target groups' points of view through questionnaires;
2) a framework and an award system for the validation of non-formal/informal learning within school based on the key competences and transversal skills as described by the EU, and the rules set by the EQF;
3) the NON-FOR-LESL OER validation tool;
4) an "Information Pack" with a Step-by-step Guide and a training course for the successful implementation of the tool in schools;
5) an implementation report in the form of case-study portfolio and
6) finally an overall evaluation report with a strategy for exploitation at the national level.

1. Context

Even if we moved from Lifelong Learning to Erasmus+ Programme, the reduction of ESL has been confirmed among the main objectives at EU level. This fact is synonymous of the importance and complexity of the phenomenon. It can cause problems both at personal level and to the society. Early school leavers feel uncomfortable and discharge consequences also within their families. At societal level, a high rate of ESL means low qualified workers and a less competitive labour market (with consequences also on the international plane). Young people are the future of whatever society and their education is the ground of all the economies. EU authorities developed the Europe 2020 strategy in order to support youth and to allow young people to develop their attitudes. This would be beneficial also for the economy and the society. According to the E.C. Staff Working Paper on Reducing ESL (2010): "reducing ESL to less than 10% by 2020 is a headline target for achieving a number of key objectives in the Europe 2020 strategy and one of the five benchmarks of the strategic framework for European cooperation in ET 2020. Europe 2020 highlights three mutual reinforcing priorities: 'smart growth' based on knowledge and innovation, 'sustainable growth' promoting a greener economy and 'inclusive growth' fostering high employment and social cohesion. High rates of ESL are detrimental to the objective of making lifelong learning a reality and a constraint to smart and inclusive growth in Europe" (p.4).

Despite of the EC point of view, ESL phenomenon lies more on individual reasons than endogenous factors (like social disadvantages or low educational backgrounds) as stated by EC. For sure, many factors are involved in causing ESL phenomenon and it cannot be analysed as a single event, but as a process starting from the first bad experiences during the initial educational level and leading towards the decision to leave the school as result of continuing failures and growing alienation.

"Facilitating the recognition and validation of knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning and its permeability with formal education pathways" as set in the Erasmus+ will promote "the improvement of the attainment of young people, particularly those at risk of ESL and with low basic skills" and at the same time "encourage the development of transversal skills which will lead to active citizenship" (Erasmus+). As many researches have shown, everyday life experiences are "rich source of human capital" (OECD). If the school system manages to validate these abilities (informally or not formally acquired), it would be easier for students to complete the formal education and to show a more skilled curriculum vitae to the labour market.

2. Objectives

The main product of NON-FOR-LESL is an OER validation tool that will be add to the traditional assessment procedures in order to create students' profiles including all the skills and abilities acquired away from the school. The students and teachers will cooperate together to build up this innovative profile. The role of the teachers is to verify the competences acquired by the students away from subjects' boundaries and to take them into account when they evaluate students' performances. The reference for this innovative validation system will be the EQF and NQF of each country and the key competences set by the EU. In this field the sector of languages is kept as example thanks to the diffusion of commonly accepted validation systems even beyond national boundaries.

For many years, European authorities have been trying to spread the use of the "portfolio", that is still the most diffused system of recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Its usefulness is appreciated more within the labour market than in the formal educational system and many European countries are still at the experimental stage of this tool. The OER aims to include many aspects of the "e-portfolio" overcoming the limits of this tool by proposing the validation of non-formal and informal learning by the formal educational system. The advantages of suche tool are many: students will have the possibility to show their ability under whatever multimedia format, they will reach a broader community thank to an online platform, they can bring together formal, informal and non-formal achievements and can update whenever their lifelong learning showcase.

The moment of the assessment is always crucial for the students and for those one who are identified as "at risk" it can be the moment in which they are going to encounter another failure, they are going to loose again their self-esteem, they are going to decide to definitely dropout from school. By promoting a new validation system in which the students are the protagonists, NON-FOR-LESL project aims also to increase students' comfort with regard to the assessment procedures.

3. Target Groups

The main target group to be addressed in the activities plan is the group of secondary school students who have for various reasons feel that the formal schooling cannot accommodate their educational needs and interests and have started to distance themselves from their classmates, the school environment and the school procedures. Therefore the target group addressed in the NON-FOR-LESL is students between the ages of 12-16 years of age who will be asked to participate on a voluntary basis with the support of their teachers. For the purpose of the project it is estimated that approximately 50 -70 students will be involved in the implementation stage, as well as 10 teachers.

4. Activities

The project, during its duration, foresees to achieve challenging results through many activities. The latter can be grouped in six main Intellectual Outputs and will be enforced by three main Multiplier Events and one Training Activity.

1. **INTERLLECTUAL OUTPUT 1: Comparative Study Analysis Report: from theory to schools' practice.**
Through literature review and documentation analysis, as well as survey among the participants for the implementation of the project (teachers, students, parents) the current scene of each country will be presented in relation to the areas under investigation. The report will also be submitted to the EU as an informative document for use by other EU countries in order to be included in the OER and portal of the Erasmus+ website. The I.O.1 will be presented in a Multiplier Event with I.O. 2.

2. **INTERLLECTUAL OUTPUT 2: Framework for the recognition and validation of Non-formal learning within students' assessment procedure in schools**
This Framework aims to recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning gained in extra-curricular activities in and out of school based on the eight key competences (K.C) with reference to EQF/NQF. During this I.O. an award system for introducing the recognition and validation of non-

formal and informal learning into the official school assessment procedure will also be designed. The I.O.2 will be presented at a Multiplier Event along with the I.O.3.

3. INTERLLECTUAL OUTPUT 3 - Development of method and Open Education Resource (OER)
This tool can be used, in secondary and VET schools, additionally to the school's assessment procedures will be developed based on a holistic view of students' learning, drawn away from subject boundaries. This I.O and I.O 2 will be presented at Multiplier Events at the local/regional level.

4. INTERLLECTUAL OUTPUT 4 - Design of accompanying Information Pack for the OER
The Information Pack will include in e-form and hard copy a manual and a step-by-step guide to use for the OER, a training course for the implementation of the OER and other support material for multiplier events.

5. INTERLLECTUAL OUTPUT 5 - Case-study and portfolio evaluation report for the Implementation of NONFORLESL tool
This study/analysis phase will record the follow up of the implementation stage through observation, interviews etc.

6. INTERLLECTUAL OUTPUT 6 - Comparative Strategy for Implementation and Exploitation and overall Evaluation Report
This phase will include the results of the survey conducted with participants as an overall evaluation, along with the strategy for implementation at national level. This I.O., as well as all others will be presented in a Multiplier Event-an in International conference, as well as at the national level at an official Ceremony for the presentation of the NON-FOR-LESL results to the official authorities. Participants will also be awarded by EU representatives.

5. Results
The use of the OER, with most of the similarities of the online platform loved by young people, will push the students to make additional efforts in order to complete their online profile with new achievements both in the informal/non-formal field and in the formal education. In doing that, at the end of the school, students' will have a personal profile completed with every kind of knowledge, skills and abilities ready to be shown to potential employers. The latter will for sure appreciate youth with validated transversal skills like teamwork, leadership or time management, social skills like active citizenship and entrepreneurship skills.

The OER tool is mainly for those students who need to improve school marks, personal confidence with their own potential and future opportunities to find a job. Nevertheless all the students will benefit by the usage of this tool. It will change students' perspective towards their school curriculum and the whole learning process.

As said above, the methodology based on the OER is not alternative but additional to the traditional assessment procedures. Beyond the innovative side represented by the collection of non-formal and informal abilities acquired through extra-curricular activities, the OER can integrate also the results of the formal education and some aspects of a "e-portfolio". Within those schools and for those students who want, on voluntary basis, to get this new proposal, the final result will be a holistic representation of the students themselves. Finally, they will be considered and assessed with regard to every aspect of their life: as formal students at school, as engaged youths towards their ambitions and as active citizens within the community.

Such set tool will be tested during project's lifecycle and beyond. Indeed, NON-FOR-LESL foresaw to provide the OER with sustainability, continuity, usability, accessibility and transferability features. Its operation will be approved through a phase piloted by schools, teachers and students. Once it gains their approval it will be easy to diffuse the tool from a school to another one and so on. Each participant will be invited to suggest improvements to make the platform closer to users' real needs. This process will assure a coherent and continuous development of the tool. By enlarging the sample of users, there will be more and more data to be freely accessed by who may be interested (according to the policy of the protection of data safeguarding the sensitive part of the profiles uploaded on the platform).

All of the above considered, the OER is a cross-subject, cross-sectorial and cross-level tool. It can be used to build an holistic assessment of the students connecting their performances within all the school disciplines, including their activity away from the school boundaries and going with them along all the level of their education.

Lastly, the structure of the project provides opportunities for teachers and students, to go through short-term training in order to upgrade their digital skills. As a result teachers' professional profiles and capabilities will be improved. Erasmus+ guidelines support such activities which will contribute to the added-value of the project.

References

[1] http://www.non4lesl.eu
[2] E.C. Staff Working Paper on Reducing ESL (2010)
[3] Erasmus+ Programme Guide