Joint Efforts for Innovation:

Working Together to Improve Foreign Language Teaching in the 21st Century

Dolors Masats, Maria Mont & Nathaly González-Acevedo (Editors)

A book for the curious and passionate 21ˢᵗ century language teachers and teacher trainers.

Tired of reading about the wonders of technology enhanced project-based learning but not knowing where to seek inspiration to start to adopt this teaching approach? A team of in-service teachers, teacher trainers, pre-service teachers and researchers have worked together to present a simple, engaging and practical book to offer fellow education professionals stimulating ideas for their teaching practice.

Joint efforts for innovation: Working together to improve foreign language teaching in the 21st century offers:

> ➢ Inspiring classroom projects and innovative teaching experiences.

> ➢ A compilation of digital tools and resources for the foreign language classroom.

> ➢ Pioneering proposals to open up the classroom doors.

> ➢ Problem-solving and inquiry-based tasks that promote team work.

> ➢ Honest reflections from practitioners on their classroom practices.

This book includes

> ➢ accessible examples of teacher-led classroom research small-scale studies.

> ➢ calls for teachers to do research in their classrooms.

> ➢ personal accounts on the importance of school internships for pre-service teachers.

This book is an invitation for practicing teachers and teacher trainers to be creative and to develop learning skills, literacy skills and life skills.

Are you ready to become an innovative 21ˢᵗ century educator?

JOINT EFFORTS FOR INNOVATION: WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Dolors Masats, Maria Mont & Nathaly Gonzalez-Acevedo (Editors)

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Bringing real-life English into your classroom

Carol Barriuso
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Departament d'Educació de la Generalitat de Catalunya

Introduction

Learning is contextualised and meaningful when teachers create opportunities for learners to participate, actively, in emotionally engaging, motivating, contextualised, constructive, collaborative and conversational guided tasks (Karpinnen, 2005). The development of Information Communications Technology (ICT) enhances and rapidly transforms opportunities for learning languages. Computers in the 1960s were used as tutors in charge of delivering instructing materials to learners. In the 1970s and 1980s, they served as vehicles to promote more authentic communication in the classroom. Nowadays computers and other technological devices are present in the classroom as tools learners can employ to learn languages in all sorts of virtual and non-virtual environments. Teachers use digital technologies as instruments that assist them when they teach in an integrative manner, often by adopting project-based approaches to learning (Warschauer & Healey, 1998; Masats, Juanuix & Albines, 2017).

Today it is impossible to promote effective learning only within the classroom walls, especially when it comes to language learning. No matter how hard we try to recreate real-life situations in class, nothing compares to authentic conversations, to the experience of taking part in real communicative situations. Students should be given the chance to improve their linguistic competence and communicative skills for a real purpose, to attain a meaningful goal. During the time learners spend at school, they should have plenty of opportunities to take part in real projects targeted at real audiences. Opening up the classroom doors to the world is a good procedure to ensure students learn the target language in context while they learn to appreciate the value of learning languages and the richness of intercultural communication (Dooly, 2010).

At first, teachers who wanted to work together online had to develop their own Content Management Systems (CMS) portals, for doing so (see, for example, Dooly, Masats & Koenraad, 2018). Now the task is less complex, as the European Commission promotes initiatives to create school partnerships as means to encourage teachers' mobility across Europe and to favour the development of transnational online (tele)collaboration programmes. This chapter

will describe two of these European-supported programmes, namely eTwinning and Erasmus+, and will illustrate the opportunities they offer teachers as keys to succeed in bringing real-life language into their classrooms.

eTwinning

The initiative was launched in January 2005 and became a part of the Comenius Lifelong Learning Program in 2007. In 2014 it was integrated into Erasmus+, the new EU programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport (2014-2020). eTwinning, also known as "The Community for schools in Europe", is a free online learning community that allows schools from Europe to collaborate within a secure platform. Its main aims are to promote collaboration among European schools in the use of ICT in the classroom, and in developing a common European identity. The platform is targeted at teachers and staff members from kindergarten to upper secondary and accessible to teachers from all the Member States of the European Union.

Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the United Kingdom are the 34 countries with full rights to participate in the eTwinning programme. In 2013, under the eTwinning Plus action, special membership status was given to eight other countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Lebanon, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Tunisia.

Figure 1. The scope of the eTwinning programme. Source. http://etwinning.es/es/que-es-etwinning/

How to get started

Setting up an account inside the eTwinning platform is not rocket science. First you need to go to the eTwinning portal (www.etwinning.net) and follow the steps to set up your account. Then your headmaster/headmistress needs to confirm the National Agency and that you are member of their school's teaching staff. When that is done, you can edit your profile and be one step closer to start igniting your teaching!
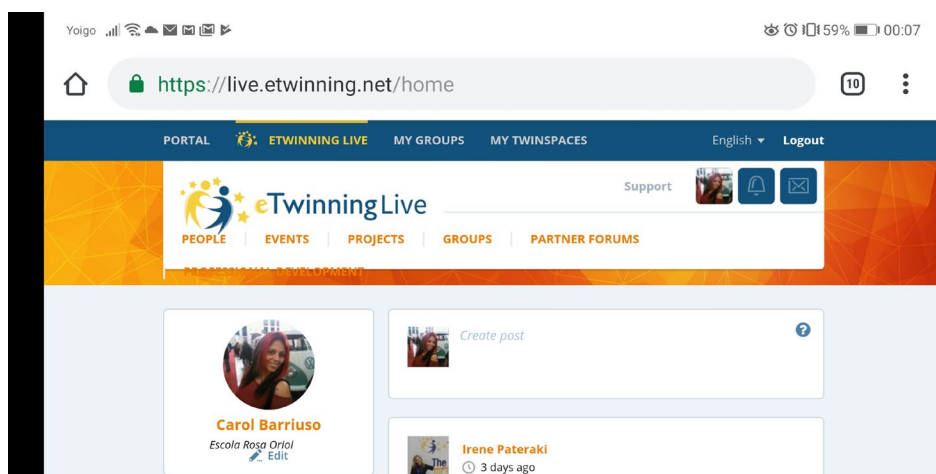

Figure 2. Example of an e Twinning account

After completing your profile, it is time then to look for potential partners. You can either go to partner forums and check the ideas proposed by other teachers or post your own preferences. These forums are split in year stages, so it becomes easier to find and share project ideas within your students' age range. You can also connect with other teachers by joining one of the eTwinning groups, participating in the Learning Events or the Professional Development Activities or by simply browsing personal profiles. You can message anyone inside the eTwinning community, but spamming must be avoided. It is advisable to send friendship requests to those people you want to connect with.

Once you have a partner, you are ready to set up your project. Only one of you can register the project, so first you need to decide which of you will do that. Setting the project up is also very simple: you need to choose your school, choose your partner, write down the most important details of what you have decided to do (project description, age range, languages, subjects, aims, expected results, etc.), review what you have written and send the proposal. Again, National Agencies need the validation of the headmaster/headmistress of both schools

to approve the project. When the project is approved, a *TwinSpace*, your own private workspace, is automatically created. When that is done, you are almost ready to start your journey through the Community for schools in Europe and let the magic begin.

What to do in TwinSpace

For a telecollaborative project to succeed, partners need to establish SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-related) goals and easy and direct modes to communicate throughout the project's life span (Mont & Masats, 2018). Before the project starts, founder teachers need to decide if they want to add to their *TwinSpace* other participants interested in the project. If that is the case, they need to do that before they register their students. When the teams are completed, students can start working together. Teachers know their project partners, students do not. That could be the first step. Teachers should first set tasks that let learners get to know one another. As examples, teachers can ask students to produce a video clip, to create a PPT or a virtual presentation using apps such as *Voki*, *Bitmoji* or *GoAnimate* or to design a "who is who game" using *Quizizz* or *Kahoot*. With any of these activities, students can practice English while they produce a real text for a real purpose: to introduce themselves to the students in the partner schools. As students need to be understood, the task sets a real context for engaging students in focus on form activities.

eTwinning projects are cross-curricular in nature, so any subject can be taught through this platform. Similarly, inside *TwinSpace*, students learn in many different ways, as the platform offers teachers a wide range of possibilities to collaborate using methodologies such as Project Based Learning (PBL), Flipped Classrooms, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and even through Gamification. Learning tasks can be designed either by the teachers or by their students. eTwinning promotes learner-centred proposals as it offers learners opportunities to gain new knowledge by doing things, by interacting with others and by learning from and with them. Collaborating with others helps students be responsible of their own learning process.

As Dooly & Sadler (2016:55) suggest, "despite the oft-cited constraints of implementing technology-enhanced online collaborative learning with very young language learners, […] (telecollaboration projects) —even with beginning learners— can provide fundamental opportunities for communicative exchanges which are key to long-term language learning". At this point, it is important to stress the value of international collaboration to create the final products. If teachers let their students start and finish the process of creating products or

sub-products for the common project, there will be no real collaboration among the students from the various participating schools. Working teams should be international and composed with students from every country. Together, and by using collaborative Web 2.0 tools, they can brainstorm ideas and take decisions on what they want to create together. In all groups students should assign responsibilities to their members and also decide how they would put everything together to create a joint product. Students are capable of producing great results and being engaged in collaborative tasks allows them to improve their language skills without noticing it! In this sense, research reveals that

> "telecollaborative tasks with young learners are more productive when they are nested within a variety of pre- and post-telecollaboration tasks that introduce and repeat the target language through many different modes within the Technology-Enhanced Project-Based Language Learning (TEPBLL) approach. It can also be seen that through the carefully scaffolded, meticulously planned TEPBLL task sequencing, the learners gradually developed more socio-pragmatic competences in their use of formulaic chunks in contextualized 'everyday' talk" (Dooly & Sadler, 2016:73).

TwinSpace has several tools (blogs, forums, chats, video chats, etc.) to help teachers bringing real-life situations to exploit in their lessons during the development of the joint project. Chat and video sessions are probably the ones children enjoy the most. Using these tools in class offers students the possibility of developing their conversation skills, both writing and speaking, and of putting into practice those language forms (e.g. to ask questions, to express an opinion, etc.) previously learnt in the regular class. Although non-synchronous communication is less fun for children, getting them to participate in fora or to write blog entries also allows them to practice language in context and to develop their communicative competence. The advantage in this case is that students have time to review their texts before posting them, and therefore they can learn from their mistakes. Finally, by reviewing the posts they create throughout a long extended period of time, students (and teachers) can become aware of their progress.

Erasmus+

Erasmus+ is the programme for Education, Youth, Culture and Sport of the European Commission for the period of 2014-2020. It supports three main types of key action:

- Key Action 1 (KA1): mobility for individuals
- Key Action 2 (KA2): cooperation for innovation and exchange of good practices
- Key Action 3 (KA3): support for policy reform

The most meaningful action for the context of this article is KA2, which promotes exchanges of teachers and students from European Countries (Member States of the European Union along with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein, Turkey and Serbia).

Erasmus+ brings teachers the opportunity to contribute to the enhancement of their students' communicative skills not only by taking part in online collaborative exchanges but also face to face.

Figure 3. Logo of the Erasmus + programme
Source: http://www.erasmusplus.gob.es/

If teachers opt to include mobility actions in their project, their pupils will have the chance to live with a foreign family for a short period of time; an experience which will undoubtedly broaden their horizons, physically and mentally, develop their cultural awareness and open their minds to the acceptance of linguistic and cultural diversity. For students and teachers, Erasmus+ is also a great opportunity to observe different learning and teaching practices within the European framework and make friends that could last for a lifetime!

Secondary school teachers can also apply for long-term mobility programmes with their students, up to two months. This kind of action allows students to develop a better understanding of the diversity of European cultures and languages and helps them acquire the necessary skills for their personal development. To ensure the quality of the mobility experience and the academic results of the students, the sending and the hosting institutions must establish a learning agreement.

To take part in this action is not as easy as in the eTwinning programme. Applicants must write a full project proposal for a period up to three years and deliver it in due time. Every year there is a call to submit proposals, and the deadline is usually around 21st March. Before they start writing an application, partners are advised to have a look at the three main priorities of that year's call. There are no restrictions concerning the topics of the projects that can be presented, but relating projects to the priorities in the call may guarantee success.

Unlike eTwinning, Erasmus+ includes funding, not only for exchanges, but also to support project management and implementation. This also explains why not all project proposals are approved. Strictly following the recommendations in the project guide facilitates the whole process. Proposals must be based on the analysis of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) of the applicant schools and should be directly linked to the attainment of the objectives proposed. The needs of partners institutions must be clearly stated in their proposal and partners need to justify how through their partnership and the funding of the European Union those needs will be covered in the long run.

Synergies between the eTwinning and the Erasmus+ initiatives

Before deciding which of the two proposals fits better the needs of their students, teachers should examine what each initiative offers. Taking a close look at the similarities and differences between the two programmes may help.

Similarities

The two programmes share six main objectives. They both

- Promote cooperative learning through the internet with two or more European partners.

- Enhance the use of ICT.

- Support collaborative projects in any area of knowledge.

- Strengthen the European dimension in school curricula.

- Boost innovation and the exchange of good practices.

- Contribute to the improvement of participants' communication skills in foreign languages.

Differences

Although eTwinning is, as we pointed out earlier, one of the initiatives promoted within the framework of Erasmus+ and shares with it key objectives, the two programmes are very different in nature. Table 1 below summarises and contrasts the traits that characterise eTwinning and Erasmus+.

	eTwinning	Erasmus+
Funding	X	✓
Mobilities of students and teachers	X	✓
Educational stages	Non-university educational levels.	School, vocational training, higher education and adult education, and other institutions related to the education and employment world.
Work area	Education Initiatives.	Education, training, youth and sport initiatives.
Partners	Minimum: two founding partners from two different countries.	Minimum: two partners from two different countries.
Application/ Date	Online. No date.	Both according to the annual announcement published by the National Agencies.
Duration	No limit.	1 to 3 school years.
Focus	European dimension. Digital competence. Collaborative work through the use of ICT tools.	European dimension. Mobility and cooperation between institutions for innovation and exchange of good practices.
Approval of the partnership	It depends solely on the checking and validation of details and ensuring that the objectives and content correspond to teaching practice.	Selected and funded or otherwise under the criteria established in the annual announcement.
Evaluation and report	Voluntary report. A project is evaluated if the teacher requests the Quality Label or Award.	Progress and final reports are mandatory.

Table 1. eTwinning and Erasmus+ initiatives compared

Formally connected, the most important difference between the two actions is funding. It is highly recommended that teachers start getting their students involved in eTwinning projects before applying for an Erasmus+ grant. This would give them the chance to get to know potential partners before actually setting up a partnership. The experience will nurture teachers with expertise and

first-hand knowledge on how to collaborate with other European teachers and would be an added value both in the evaluation process (eligibility) and during the project development. In fact, previous participation in a successful eTwinning project has been included among the potential benefits of applying for an Erasmus+ grant as listed in the programme guidelines this year.

Concluding remarks

Bringing real-life language into the classrooms is one of the most challenging facets foreign language teachers need to face. Creating real communicative situations is essential to help learners develop their interactional competence and their communicative skills, but it is not an easy task. The internet has transformed learning and teaching practices and offers teachers and learners opportunities to contextualise learning. European initiatives like eTwinning and Erasmus+ open up the classroom doors and support initiatives based on creating partnerships of schools whose teachers are interested in developing collaborative projects with teachers from other European countries. The proposals are different in nature but both are based on the premises that languages cannot be learnt detached from other fields of knowledge and that learners will only use a foreign language if that use serves a communicative purpose.

Acknowledgments

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