



Learning about the European Union in school through eTwinning

By Stoyanka Vicheva Delibeeva

Stoyanka Vicheva Delibeeva is a senior English teacher in the 18th Secondary School ‘William Gladstone’, Sofia, Bulgaria. She obtained her master’s degree from Sofia University ‘St. Kliment Ohridski’. Active in European Erasmus+ activities, she has participated in several eTwinning Projects. Her work focuses on the potential of task-based language teaching (TBLT) and the project-based approach to English language learning.
Address for correspondence: delibeeva@abv.bg

Abstract

Learning languages, both indigenous and foreign, is an agreed priority in the European Union in terms of the development of communicative language skills of citizens. This paper explores the linguistic benefits for students and teachers involved in European eTwinning projects. The eTwinning programme promotes collaboration between schools in Europe by supporting projects that enhance pupils’ learning. Within this context, project-based learning has proven to be a supportive approach in helping students develop linguistic skills and digital literacy. Projects comprise sequences of tasks that give students opportunities to develop, to practise and to improve all their skills, not only their English language skills. The emphasis is on creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration. The paper reports on findings from a Bulgarian research project funded by Sofia University entitled ‘The EU starts at school’, and reports on the development of linguistic skills within project-based activities in the eTwinning project.

Introduction

The motto of European Union – ‘united in diversity’ – is particularly visible in the co-existence of many languages in Europe, where promoting language competences in at least two foreign languages in addition to the mother tongue is an agreed priority across Member States. Communicative language competence is therefore one of the most important skills for students to acquire. Communicative competence in a foreign language can be fostered through activities delivered in content-based learning context. This paper presents some student attitudinal research conducted such a content-based context in Bulgaria, where the topic of learning is the European Union itself, delivered through the eTwinning platform in a secondary school. eTwinning is an initiative of the European Commission that aims to encourage European schools to collaborate through an online platform. The platform provides tools, support and services for schools throughout Europe to communicate, collaborate and develop projects together. Since its launched in 2005, so far more than 190,000 schools across Europe have participated in the eTwinning platform.



Benefits of engaging virtually across borders

A successful language policy can improve citizens' quality of life in terms of enhanced employment prospects, access to services and rights, intercultural dialogue and social cohesion. A key priority in education is raising achievement for all, so that each child can show their potential and acquire the skills, knowledge and understanding to live and work in a rapidly changing world. In the classroom, authentic and meaningful activities help learners become more independent and culturally aware. Growing diversity in European societies increases the need for promoting inclusion and common values, as well as positive responses to diversity. The eTwinning platform offers a virtual space to improve language learning and intercultural outcomes, where students learn how to use the language for a variety of purposes and functions, including when and how to change their language outputs depending on the situation and the participants. For example, eTwinning activities guide students as to when to use formal and informal speech or when to use a language suitable for written or oral communication, and how to understand and create different types of texts, such as stories, reports, interviews, conversations. eTwinning also teaches how to maintain communication despite limited productive language skills, encouraging for example, different types of communication strategies. Each eTwinning project has its own aims and working methods ICT as the means of communication and collaboration. Students are responsible for organizing and performing collaborative tasks with learners in other countries and regions. Technology has changed the quality and nature of language learning considerably and this provides rich opportunities for the language classroom to reach beyond school walls and national borders. The development of joint online projects, implemented by at least two schools, is at the centre of the eTwinning endeavour. Students can build key competences which are cross-curricular and therefore applicable to all subjects and school activities.

Diagnostic research project

The eTwinning project described in this paper, 'The EU in short for teens', is designed to help secondary students acquire socio-cultural competences. The project introduces students to the culture and society of European Union Member States within a broad European and global context. Like all eTwinning actions, the present project enriches both digital and intercultural learning, and helps students acquire knowledge, skills, abilities and personal qualities that they can demonstrate through communication in the target language (English in this case). The purpose of the 'The EU in short for teens' programme is to improve students' English language competence through communicative and interactive tasks which foster both receptive (reading, listening) and productive (speaking, writing) skills. The programme incorporates topics from the field of civic education related to specific topics relevant to the European Union. Thematic areas and classroom activities in the programme are tailored to the interests, the age and experience of the students.

The overall diagnostic research study commenced in a Bulgarian secondary school in January 2016 and continued for six months in the first school year of upper education (ninth grade) and was repeated in the school year 2016/2017, ending in June 30, 2017 (the end of the school year for students in the tenth grade). Twenty-six students were enrolled in the class, where the researcher was also the classroom instructor. Information on individual students' online achievements serves to manage, link and analyse data at an early stage, and enables any necessary measures to be taken in due time to improve the performance of students who fall behind.

The aims of the research project were to determine whether the students met the descriptors in receptive and productive skills at the A1 level according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001). As indicated elsewhere in this volume, the CEFR forms the basis for the development of language curricula, examinations and textbooks throughout Europe, including Bulgaria. Act 78 (3) in Bulgaria's Pre-school and School Education Act states: 'The curricula for the subject matter 'foreign language' in the two upper secondary schools shall be established at levels of competence in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages' (Republic of Bulgaria Ministry of Education and Science 2015). The curriculum for English as a second foreign language for pupils in ninth and tenth grades aims to help them achieve A1 common European proficiency level by the end of tenth grade.

The project aimed to measure, based on testing results of online activities, whether the eTwinning programme allowed students to meet the communicative language competences set out at the A1 level in the CEFR. Descriptive statistical tools were used to provide basic information about variables in a dataset and to highlight potential links between variables. Two language tests (standardized and non-standardized) were administered at the end of the tenth grade. The mean results from receptive and productive skills of twenty-six students tested demonstrated that by the end of the tenth grade, all had achieved A1 level in their English language tests. In receptive skills, the mean score was 4.88 out of a maximum score of 6, whilst the mean score in productive skills was 4.64 out of a maximum score of 6. These scores equated to a Very Good in the Bulgarian scoring matrix, where 6 is Excellent and 3 is the minimum passing score. As is frequently the case, scores in the receptive skills outstripped scores in productive skills. The Pearson coefficient summary data for the four language skills is presented in Table 1 below.



Skills	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing
Listening	1			
Reading	0.651467	1		
Speaking	0.60307	0.718648	1	
Writing	0.511955	0.629455	0.603201	1

Table 1: The coefficient of linear correlation

The analysis of the results shows the lowest coefficient between listening and writing skills 0.51 ($r = 0.40$ to 0.69 , $p < 0.05$), which suggests there is a moderate positive relationship between listening and writing. The test results also demonstrate a positive significant relationship between reading and speaking skills ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.05$) which implies there is a strong relationship between reading and speaking.

Conclusion

This paper has explored some language outcomes of an eTwinning project which used topics related to the European Union to teach English language at ninth and tenth grades, aiming for A1 proficiency level amongst students by the end of the second year of study. Results suggest that the project allowed students to acquire language competences in an integrated manner. Language classes had a real-life purpose and students were exposed to a range of academic, soft and digital skills. Communicative competence, along with the development of personal and social competences, forms the pedagogical rationale for the design of the approaches described above. School partnership projects and online collaboration activities represent new opportunities for e-learning. This paper has demonstrated that implementation of eTwinning projects in foreign language teaching fosters the acquisition of all four language skills as well as the acquisition of key personal and social competences.



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Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
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