

LANGUAGE LEARNING AS MEANS TO AN END

ÎNVĂȚAREA LIMBILOR STRĂINE: MIJLOC ÎN LOC DE SCOP

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Abstract. *One of the most important goals of the European Union is to promote and sustain lifelong learning and learning strategies for life and it is a challenge to implement this attitude with young children. The aim of this article is to describe a project co-financed by the European Union, called EAT (Eating Abroad Together), project that aims at achieving these goals. The main goals of the EAT project are to sustain language learning and to promote multilingualism and cultural awareness. As language learning is more efficient when it takes place in a context relevant to the learner, all the activities of the project are based on a communication tool created for children in different countries, communication centered on the idea of healthy eating.*

Key words: healthy eating, language learning, CLIL, family learning

Rezumat. *Unul din principalele scopuri ale Uniunii Europene este promovarea și susținerea învățării pe tot parcursul vieții. Implementarea unor strategii de învățare pe tot parcursul vieții constituie o provocare și când vine vorba de copiii de vârstă mică. Scopul acestui articol este să descrie un proiect co-finanțat de Uniunea Europeană, intitulat EAT (Eating Abroad Together – Să mâncăm sănătos împreună), proiect care urmărește aceste scopuri. Principalele sale obiective sunt să sprijine învățarea pe tot parcursul vieții și să promoveze multilingvismul și toleranța. Deoarece învățarea de limbi străine este mai eficientă când se desfășoară într-un context care este relevant pentru student, toate activitățile proiectului se bazează pe un instrument de comunicare creat pentru copiii din diferite țări, instrument care are la bază ideea de promovare a obiceiurilor nutriționale sănătoase.*

Cuvinte cheie: alimentație sănătoasă, învățare de limbi străine, CLIL, învățare în cadrul familiei

INTRODUCTION

The project EAT focuses on developing and instilling healthy eating habits for the young age. To create a more motivating and user friendly approach the project partnership has decided to include elements that would contextualize learning activities and thus create an authentic space for children to activate within. Encouraging children to acquire a foreign language is one of the elements meant to enrich the fundamental focus of the project- healthy eating. By engaging children in multilingual tasks and providing them with a virtual support in this sense (the project website: www.eatingabroadtogether.eu) the project has created a flexible and yet coherent structure easily adaptable to country specificities allowing national and international groups to express themselves and at the same

time following a prior set path. This also helps children improve their attitude towards different cultures and see differences not as interesting facts they can themselves benefit from.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The partnership - Italy, Romania, the Netherlands, the UK and Bulgaria - has selected a total of twenty schools (four from each country) to take part in the project activities. The activities were structured on thematic projects for the children to create – all centered on the idea of promoting healthy eating. Thus, they have presented their country, school, home town to their foreign partner, they have wrote diaries on their national traditions and they have discussed via blogs and emails about what is healthy and what it is not. The main communication tool created is the website of the project: www.eatingabroadtogether.eu. The website is a collection of the blogs the children wrote to each other, of healthy and traditional recipes that they have uploaded, and an extensive database made of words related to eating and healthy food, of frequent words and phrases, of basic expressions that are necessary for understanding a foreign language at an elementary level. All the words are translated into the five languages of the project: English, Romanian, Dutch, Bulgarian, Italian and French and German as added value.

These less widely used and widely used languages are introduced to children in a friendly and relaxed manner. They do not have to study the languages but simply select the vocabulary they might be interested in for various activities (holidays abroad, communicating with the international partners etc) and valorise it in the manner they consider most appropriate. All the words have an audio recording – made by the children themselves – that help the potential learner to pronounce the words correctly, and a picture is attached to each word.

The coordinates of the project were to promote language learning by offering a relevant framework to motivate and sustain the learning process. As on a wider global context it has become very important to raise awareness on the dangers of an unhealthy lifestyle among young people, the framework chosen was healthy eating. More precisely, the children attended sessions with nutritionists, school doctors and nurses, teachers that taught them about the benefits of a healthy diet and that encouraged them to share the facts learned at school, with their families and colleagues.

On the platform and with its help the children have done many activities that facilitated their language learning. On the one hand, they have improved their English, as all the communication (translation of words for the website, writing letters to the partner school, writing blogs) has taken place in this language, but they have also acquired basic knowledge of less widely used less taught languages such as Bulgarian, Romanian, and Dutch.

This project has brought an important contribution to raising awareness of intercultural matters and to helping children become more comfortable and tolerant in a multicultural environment. A lot of the activities developed within the project have focused on the children sharing cultural differences and similarities.

The cultural component is equally emphasised and it is actually the structure around which all the other activities are developed. The entire process is framed by the intercultural dialogue within which all partners promote their countries and cultural identities. It is in the best interest of the children to acquire as much as possible from what they are particularly interested in. Some of the children might be interested in the similarities between a certain foreign language and their mother tongue especially

because their parents are working abroad and they feel connected to that certain language. Some other might be interested in finding out more about a certain foreign culture simply because they have already visited or because they plan to visit that country. Whatever their reasons, the basic rule remains that long term constructive motivation comes from within and only this way children's needs are fulfilled in order to make a real change and develop real life skills.

The activities in the project are decided together with the teachers. There is an efficient communication and collaboration channel between the teachers and the coordinators. These all are the premises of a successful process. Transferring information between the different levels of the project, coordinators, teachers, children, parents, local community, is the key to creating a feasible product which all the elements of the target groups can access and use.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Through the *EAT* project teachers valorise the use of a cross curricular approach and integrated learning activities raises the chances of building a more efficient learning process for the children participating in this project. First of all this manner of work addresses more types of intelligence which allows children to particularise and internalise new information in their own ways. Secondly children are not set on learning a certain piece of information. By using various topics, like healthy eating in our case, they have the chance to explore so many other aspects of their own language and culture and also of their own habits.

The activities in the project raise children's awareness on the importance of a healthy and balanced eating diet. Besides the linguistic component the activities also involve cultural elements from each participant country. The final product is therefore in the shape of a communication channel between European countries and information exchange on cultural issues. The added value is the linguistic component of the project. Just like in the previous project children are only focused on learning foreign languages, not in a formal setting anyway. The learning process here is focused on practical and useful activities that would help children develop the skills they most need to personalize and take on their own learning process. Acquiring a set of words in the foreign languages, vocabulary they can then use when going abroad is but a survival kit that would motivate learners to find out more about the target languages and their cultural background.

During the entire implementation of the project there have been a series of achievements extremely important for focusing on the key issues of the project. Through experiential learning children were involved in hands-on activities relevant for more than their eating diets. Language skills were improved, LWUL were disseminated and children were encouraged to spread the information themselves as they were going back to their families. All this resulted in a smooth communication with the families of the children involved in the project. Parents responded much more easily to all the activities organized by the schools providing the necessary ingredients for the cooking classes and participating in a number of meetings and events such as the BIG EAT – the final event of the project each of the partners had to organize for the schools involved in their country.

CONCLUSIONS

Teaching foreign languages will always be a challenge and even a greater challenge is to sustain motivation for learning. Providing a context that is relevant to the learner, context in which language learning can take place by achieving other goals besides language learning *per se* has proven to be an efficient means to an end.

The context that the EAT project has created has proven to be attractive for the young learners for mainly two reasons: on the one hand, the children had the curiosity of exploring the culture of a foreign country and, on the other hand, they had a modern and attractive tool to do that, namely the project website which is interactive, easy to use and attractive to the targeted age group.

Therefore, language teachers and language course developers should try to focus on the value of language learning as it is: a means to an end and not a goal in itself. Getting involved and making use of the ideas already present on the site of the project is a way of transferring ready-made, tested and validated products with a European wide guarantee directly into your classes. No matter what the level to which the material is adapted, the emphasis will always be on intercultural communication as a premise for disseminating national values and cultures. It is after all only fair to let the young ones in on maximizing their national specificities at a global level.

REFERENCES

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