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The mobility of the teachers trainees: why and what objectives?

Analysis of the program COMENIUS-EUROPROF

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Introduction

The teaching of foreign languages has, for some time, been viewed as both a major challenge and a necessity throughout Europe. It is within this context that eight partner institutions from eight European countries decided to collaborate on a European funded project entitled Europrof. It was co-ordinated by SSIS Italy and the partners were :

- Pädagogisches Institut des Landes Tirol, Innsbruck, Autriche
- Pädagogische Akademie des Landes Tirol, University, Innsbruck, Autriche
- CVU Sønderjylland (Centre for Higher Education in South Jutland, Denmark)
- Institut Universitaire de Formation des Maîtres (IUFM) de Bretagne, France
- Department of English Didactics, Vilnius Pedagogical University, Vilnius, Lituanie
- Nauczycielskie Kolegium Języków Obcych w Puławach, Pologne
- St Martin's College, Lancaster, Royaume-Uni

The initial motivation was not only to develop the teaching of foreign languages but also to reflect upon their own actions and practices, to learn from these and then to compare and contrast their own experiences and reflections with the teaching, methodologies and experiences of others. In addition partners considered it fundamental to develop intercultural knowledge, understanding and competence within teacher educators, mentors and student teachers, in order to promote tolerance and understanding between different nations and cultures and to encourage greater teacher mobility across Europe.

The project's specific aims and objectives were therefore to:

- explore and understand differing models, course structures and content of foreign language initial teacher education programmes in Europe, to analyse similarities and differences;
- identify, develop and enhance the knowledge and competences – didactic, intercultural and linguistic – required by foreign language teachers at a European level and to do this through a two week training period in a foreign institution and the development of modules for the student teachers’ induction into observation and teaching within this different European context / learning environment;
- share and develop together an innovative ‘European Professional Portfolio’ which would be common to all partner institutions and which would document not only the student mobility experience but also the rest of their professional journey.

However partners’ work together also identified other, more deep-seated, philosophical motivations. They stemmed from two fundamental desires : firstly to break down cultural barriers amongst young professionals and to provide them with opportunities for intercultural learning. Partners wanted to observe the way they worked together (interestingly the ‘barriers’ were not as they might have imagined); to encourage them to embrace the variety of languages and cultural diversity by giving them the chance to explore and reflect upon their own culture by comparing it to others’. In addition partners wanted them to compare their knowledge and skills with a totally new cultural context and with new people, to face the challenge of a new environment, a new language, new methods and techniques and to gain experience of all of these. But most of all they wanted them to learn about every aspect of staying, working and living in a foreign country, teaching foreign pupils and communicating with them, their teachers and other student teachers.

Secondly partners were keen to identify common principles in teacher education across Europe, to explore common principles such as autonomy and the concept of action research, to learn from one another, identifying potential solutions to issues or gaps in their own systems and considering how they might do this; and above all they were keen to create a productive professional working network.

In this article, we are going to pay our attention on the process of mobility within this program.

1. The concept of mobility in this program

The second phase of the project had plan and implement a student mobility period during which 14 student teachers from each country would, in pairs, spend two weeks taking part in the initial teacher education programme (part university-based and part in school) in one of the other seven partner states, spending time meeting and discussing, observing and teaching in local schools. It would be recognised by all partners as an integral part of the student teachers' training programmes and would be monitored and evaluated as such. The mobility periods would take place in the second and third years of the project, allowing us to trial and evaluate an initial experience with a view to refining it for the third year. The visits would happen simultaneously : each partner would host an international group of 14 student teachers at the same time which, it was hoped, would enable some significant development of intercultural awareness. There were two functional dimensions to the student mobility:

- a personal dimension where young professionals met for a period of time and learnt about each other's personal, cultural, national and professional reality;
- a professional dimension where the student teachers learnt about different school cultures and teachers' attitudes, working conditions and daily tasks within another culture and school system.

In order to provide a guiding framework for the mobility experience, partners decided to develop two modules – one focusing on didactic and the other on intercultural aspects of the experience. Although initially planned as discrete modules, the interplay between the two was fundamental : they wanted to underline the notion of education taking place within a cultural setting.

The purpose of the mobility period was to enable student teachers to reach a deeper understanding of their own school culture and their own professional future in the light of others', through presentation and through comparison. It would help them to identify their own priorities, to stimulate reflection and creativity and to gain confidence in both language use and teaching skills.

The modules were intended to structure and intensify the student teachers' experience; to ensure that their experience was such that it gave them the opportunity to think about and analyse the similarities and differences they encountered, not only in terms of teaching and learning but also in terms of culture. The specific aim of the intercultural module was to enable the student teachers to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with different but equally valid values, attitudes and habits. To do so, partners provided guidelines and suggestions for cultural

analysis and comparison, requiring them to reflect on social and cultural aspects related to the life and educational systems of the countries they visited. The didactic module, on the other hand, was based on an action research cycle and aimed to develop a focus on teaching and learning by including observation and reflection prompts, suggestions for planning and for resources which catered for pupils' learning styles and needs as well as guidelines for self-evaluation and for reflecting on and comparing their own training experience with the one encountered in the host country. Partners were eager to ensure that their observation and experience was focused and allowed them to gain the maximum from their brief time working abroad. The modules, therefore, provided the backbone to the mobility programme as well as a framework for reflection on both the didactic and the intercultural; it also aimed to support the development of their own professional skills.

The mobility period was envisaged as a study visit where a number of young professionals from different countries would go on an exchange visit to the same institution, in the same country, at the same time. They would stay in the same accommodation or with host families according to the culture visited, so that they could meet frequently for preparation, discussion, analysis and cultural events and exchanges.

All partners worked together to agree the aims and objectives of the student mobility period and how to translate this into practice. Partners worked as teams on developing the didactic and intercultural modules which would support this experience. In order to discuss at long distance (after preliminary brainstorming at the international meeting in Poland where partners agreed the format of the modules in terms of before, during and after mobility and also the essential aspects which partners wanted student teachers to particularly focus on during the mobility period) partners developed the use of a wiki site for 'housing' ideas. Initial proposals were posted on the site, each partner was then allocated a 'colour' which they used to comment on and add to the original text. These ideas were then collated by 'teams' of partners and turned into draft modules for the third international meeting in Denmark.

In terms of planning the programme for the mobility period itself, each local group organised this along the lines of an agreed framework. This meant initially holding an information meeting for those student teachers interested in participating in the programme – and in some cases devising an application and selection process -, organising local meetings with mentors, finding school placements and accommodation (which came within the EU funding / subsistence rates which each student teacher received) and organising and arranging cultural and social events for the visiting

student teachers. In addition the outgoing student teachers needed detailed briefing prior to their departure as well as debriefing on their return. In terms of the mobility programme itself there would be an initial meeting in university on the first day, a mid-term meeting to monitor progress and iron out any issues and answer any pressing questions and a final meeting to pull the whole experience together. The rest of the time would be spent partly in school – observing and teaching – and partly in university, taking part – where possible – in the university-based programme. Each partner also planned a ‘treasure hunt’ of the local town and an international meal where all the visiting student teachers brought something to eat or drink from their own country.

In order to prepare the student teachers for their experience, partners developed a ‘ning’ site called the Europrof Community where they posted information about the countries that they would be visiting together with suggested reading material that they should read prior to travelling. The outgoing student teachers in each country also devised a ‘cultural questionnaire’ about their own country for the visiting student teachers to ‘answer’ in advance of their visit. The ning site also gave the participating student teachers the opportunity to communicate and make contact with each other both before and after the mobility period, to share their expectations and fears about the mobility experience and to present materials, pictures and texts about their own country.

Prior to the mobility period, following Byram’s model, the student teachers were asked to begin reflecting on themselves and their own country and culture (how do I see myself?) and then to shift their perspective to focus on ‘how do others see me?’ They then moved on to looking outside their own perspective (how do I see the host country?) This process of developing self-awareness began during the pre-mobility phase and continued throughout their time abroad and on their return. They were also encouraged to start writing a reflective diary.

During the mobility period itself they were asked to undertake a range of tasks (by means of the two modules and the professional portfolio) which required them to

- compare and contrast the different cultures, educational systems and approaches to training, teaching and learning (not just of the host country but also of the other international student teachers);
- plan, teach and reflect upon lessons;
- observe a range of different teaching and learning strategies, techniques and approaches;
- evaluate their experience.

On their return they

- prepared a lesson for local pupils about the country visited;
- prepared and delivered a presentation for other student teachers, teachers, mentors etc. about their experience;
- completed the ‘assessment of intercultural skills’ questionnaire on the ning website;
- compiled and submitted a portfolio which included cultural questionnaires, observation and fact-finding evidence, information about classes taught, teaching plans and materials, a reflective diary;

In addition they provided exemplar material for the Europrof website.

The first mobility period took place in Year 2 of the project and in the light of extensive and detailed evaluatory feedback from mentors, university tutors and most importantly the student teachers themselves, the programme was revised and strengthened and the modules streamlined. Although these had originally been intended as two discrete modules, it became apparent that there were significant overlaps and therefore to continue to develop them as independent entities would create artificial divisions. Partners discovered that it was impossible to separate the intercultural experience from the didactic one.

The student mobility period took place during two consecutive years (January 2008 and January 2009), deliberately planned in order to be able to learn from the first experience in order to make refinements and improvements for the second (see action research model). Initially it was only envisaged as one of three ‘products’ arising from the project but it soon resulted in being the very core of it with the ITT mapping, modules and professional portfolio arising out of and feeding into the mobility experience. Indeed it was invaluable in the trialling of the didactic and intercultural modules and the professional portfolio.

2. The motivation and the felt of the trainees

Why did the trainees apply to the EUROPROF program ? What attracted them in the presentation of the program ? The European and international dimension is strongly present in the motivations.

- I applied because I thought it would enrich my experiences and inspire my teaching. I was attracted by the idea of training in a foreign country as I have always been attracted by travelling and meeting other people and experiencing other cultures. I think it makes you expand your professional perspective considerably.
- To compare European educative system, to meet language's teachers from Europe
- Because the summary of the program mentioned that we'd be working on the methodology and evaluation of foreign language teaching in Europe. I've been working in an international program and am very interested in keeping close contact with what English language teachers are doing in other countries, especially in English-speaking countries.
- The possibility of travelling and being part of an important programme
- The fact that there was an opportunity of exchanging knowledge and experience between countries.
- I was interested in the possibility to try teaching in another country. I also thought it was a good opportunity to see how teaching differs from country to country. I Expected this program would be a great experience for future teaching.
- It's a unique opportunity and I wanted to get to know another school system and the culture of a European country.
- I was applied to the program because I had good results in studying. What was interested for me is that this program gave me the chance to exchange information about teaching with people from other countries.

On the other hand, the work and reflection on the on-line portfolio is not a determining factor in the choice of the trainees :

- I was unaware that this would be part of the program until the preparation day before departure that was well after I had registered and been accepted for the program.
- I didn't know what it was a portfolio and how to use it.
- For me working on on-line portfolio was a waste of time which I could spend this time more effectively.
- Because for me this is not the most important fact.

- I found it a bit repetitive and sometimes useless. Moreover, I had already done such reflections in my life.
- Because we hadn't really worked a lot with the portfolio idea, and it was therefore not an important factor for me.

The trainees have chooses in a very personal way their destination. The criteria of choice concern essentially to cultural points.

- I was looking for an opportunity to go to an English-speaking country to regain contact with some of the teaching methods for English to English speakers because of my situation as a native speaker teaching English in an international program.
- I always want to know Iceland: the countryside and Icelandic culture; the Nordic educative system.
- I love Austria and it is close to my country? just in case of need.
- I always wanted go to France and have a knowledge about their educational system.
- I mainly focused on where I could develop the most. And Iceland was also chosen because it was a place I would never go on my own.
- We had a lottery among the students from my university who were elected to participate in the program.
- I was interested in Iceland because of my studies at University (Danish language and Scandinavian Literatures) and because I had always been fascinated by the country in itself and because I thought the teaching programs there would be much more practical with a wide usage of audiovisuals and the level of English of the pupils pretty high.
- One aspect was that I've already know the language Italian. But in general I think every other country is interesting.

Being in a foreign country was very beneficial for the trainees in this program :

- For the cultural experience and exchange and to see the way languages are taught in another country, especially in a country where the language one is planning to teach is the native language.
- To discover an other system, it's necessary to see it, to understand better; To exchange with all the staff of a foreign school; To teach in the other school system.
- I was able to make lots of experiences. After these two weeks at a school in Florence, I got a general idea of how things are going on in an Italian secondary school and of the way of teaching. Aside from school, I experienced the Italian hospitality and the Italian way of living.

- It was beneficial because I had a chance to observe people from different culture.
- If I had stayed in Denmark, it wouldn't have been possible to see/experience the differences of the school systems. And to experience the living in another country was also beneficial.
- I learned a lot about another country and its culture.
- I taught in school with a different educational system and I could get new ideas out of it which might improve my school system.
- Apart from the stunning beauty of Reykjavik, the surroundings and the warm welcome we all received, the organization was faultless and the ethics of work very interesting to observe as well as the dynamics between the participants in the project and the groups which formed never experienced during my courses abroad where all foreigners were usually united, but maybe in those courses (Minority Course for ex.) we were coming from very different backgrounds too but all were interested in getting along with each other more than showing off how good or better off we were.

During the trip, a lot of thing were beneficial for the trainees :

- The teacher trainers at the University were wonderful and really got us thinking about our teaching practices. They also shared with us many good teaching ideas and even sent us each a CD Rom of information to use after the program. My exchange with the English teacher was also beneficial for my future work with native speakers, though more in-depth work with her would have been preferable.
- I have a new point of view about teaching. The comparison between the Icelandic system and the French system, and less with the others systems of the others trainers, gave me the opportunity to think about the educative system.
- Some good friends and colleagues in other country and an insight in other school systems and thereby also a better understanding of my own.
- Experience about teaching.
- The experiences in a foreign country (school system, culture, habitues ...)
- The most beneficial was meeting different people during my trip.
- I have always been interested in international cooperation and that's the main reasons why I continue travelling because I think we can all learn from each other no matter the biased visions of other cultures we might be given in our homelands. On a human level I found my experience in Kvenno the best training ever and I also liked the exchange we were given the opportunity to have with the pupils.

Perhaps one of the most positive and fruitful aspects of the experience was the meeting of different nationalities, cultures, habits and teaching styles. This created a wealth of very enriching and stimulating intercultural exchanges and experiences not only for the student teachers but also for mentors, university tutors, pupils and other staff in schools. The student teachers learnt a great deal about the country visited but also about other countries as well.

Conclusion

In terms of educational and teaching approaches the project has been successful in professionally developing teacher educators within the partner institutions through contacts, communication, the exchange of experiences and collaborative work. At the same time student teachers have benefited significantly through their experience of mobility, guided and supported by the two modules, and also through participating in the project itself in terms of planning and evaluation. Mentors in schools have welcomed and guided the student teachers in their practice in schools and have taken part in project discussions and decisions. And last but not least, pupils in the schools have profited from the rich and diverse input of a group of student teachers from all over Europe, giving them a very different perspective on their own reality.

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