THE USE OF EU LLL PROJECTS TO ENHANCE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN NON-FORMAL EDUCATION IN LATVIA
ES mūžizglītības projekti valodu apguvei neformālajā izglītībā Latvijā

Silvija Karklina
Public Service Language Centre, Latvia
University of Latvia, Latvia
E-mail: silvija.karklina@vmc.lv

Abstract, *The present papers deals with the use of support mechanism for language instruction in the context of lifelong learning, which is of utmost importance for individual growth and for society as a whole. Although adults prefer the traditional learning /teaching environment, new worldwide processes in language instruction have brought terms such as plurilingualism, intercultural competence, language skill development, and communicative competence into everyday life. Through the creation of open space for intercultural dialogue, the communicative skills of adult learners are promoted, and a sustainable environment for continuous language learning is created. The author has analyzed the development and integration of authentic intercultural space with the practical teaching of adults, as well as their introduction and use in the learning/teaching environment in order to enhance the language acquisition process.*
Keywords: *intercultural competence, language café, plurilingualism, skill development.*

Introduction

The internationalisation of the economy, constantly developing forms of communication and increased mobility have been accompanied by an increased demand for language skill acquisition in several foreign languages by both employers and employees. Plurilingual competence has been defined as the capacity to acquire and use different competences in different languages at different language proficiency levels. (Beacco & Byram, 2007). The demand for a greater number of different foreign language skills has given rise to the demand for plurilingual education; thus, several foreign languages are being taught both in school curricula and as a part of lifelong learning programmes. *"The notion of plurilingual and intercultural education tends to characterize this conceptua*lisation of education as determined by values such as those proposed by the Council of Europe, and by a global language education across all languages present in school and all disciplinary domains. It aims at the development of plurilingual and intercultural competence and also the broadening of the linguistic and discursive repertoire of the learner, being at the same time a preparation for lifelong learning." (Council of Europe Language Policy Division *Plurilingual et intercultural education as a project, 2009).*

Plurilingual competence is not a goal in itself. The Lisbon Strategy requires the European Union to become the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world which offers every individual the opportunity to acquire the basic skills, including foreign language skills.

Skills development is an important factor not only for personal growth but also for influencing national economic growth. "Skills development can make a very valuable contribution to prosperity. But these beneficial economic and social outcomes are not automatic. In order to maximize the impact of skills development, a strategic approach to the design, development and management of skills systems is valuable. Indeed without such an approach a coherent 'system' is unlikely to develop at all, with policy limited to potentially unconnected and uncoordinated action which risks expectations being unfulfilled or even policy failure. Moreover, substantial public resources are invested in skills development and it is essential that these are used effectively." (Campbell, 2012). Consequently, foreign language skills development, or promotion of plurilingualism, is an important factor in enhancing the labour sills of the workforce.

In adult education, lifelong learning is seen as an opportunity to upgrade qualified skills. Sue Jackson (2011) points out that in the conditions of "global recession, lifelong learning – increasingly constructed within a skills agenda – has been seen as an answer to unemployment, political stability, and social inclusion." Every individual is given a chance to improve existing skills or to acquire new skills that are necessary in the labour market; thus, the demand for skilled labour is satisfied, and with its new skills the workforce becomes more competitive. By helping themselves, individuals who are committed to acquiring new skills "fill employment gaps, help move countries out of recession." Sue Jackson is sceptical about lifelong learning as a global remedy in post-compulsory education because it offers greater access to vocational learning, but the author of this paper believes that lifelong learning can be regarded as a resource for individuals who have completed compulsory education but are not able to continue their education, and thus, fill the ranks of the unemployed. "The discourses and policies of lifelong learning have become ever more firmly linked to economic participation through the employment market and the development of skills and training, with a policy focus on skills development for the workplace, and greater participation from employers in determining learning opportunities and directions. The development of human capital becomes the responsibility of individuals, on whom it is incumbent to find, recognise and develop the learning opportunities that will enable them to take their place in a working society, although the types of opportunities are selective and hierarchical." (Jackson, 2010)

In the rapidly changing labour market there is an increasing demand for regular or constant upgrading of skills. Such a skills upgrade can help to prolong the productive period of senior citizens, enable young school leavers who have mastered some vocational skills and also short-term unemployed persons to find a job.

Since foreign language skills can be considered as basic skills, it may be inferred that foreign language learning not only gives greater flexibility to the workforce but also increases generic skills and changes attitudes and behaviour, which, in turn, leads to greater employability.

Intercultural competence in the framework of skills development

Mike Campbell (2012) distinguishes "three types of skills:

(i) Technical or professional skills: the competencies required to undertake a specific job or occupation

(ii) Generic or core skills: comprising cognitive and interactive, which can be applied in a range of jobs/occupations

(iii) Employability skills: the attitudes and behaviours required in the workforce." (Campbell, 2012)

In terms of vocational education and in lifelong learning these are technical or professional and core skills which are being paid the greatest attention to. With regard to attitudes and behaviours this is "where employers are heavily involved." (Campbell, 2012)

Foreign language skills as one of the core skills are highly necessary for both the employer and the employee. Consequently, the question arises as to the priority list of the foreign languages to be learnt. As Teresa Tinsley states: "In today's changing world it is increasingly difficult to predict which languages students will need in their future lives. Language learning is being conceived more and more as lifelong activity, in which individuals are constantly improving and maintaining their skills in existing languages, and acquiring new ones. In today's Europe partial competence is becoming regarded as something extremely useful rather than something to be ashamed of. The aim of language education might be reformulated as the preparation of plurilingual speakers who have a high level competence in a range of other languages. Additionally , they have developed language learning strategies which will enable them to acquire a degree of competence in new languages once the need arises."(Tinsley, 2003)

Communicative language teaching has gained ground as an approach to foreign language teaching in Latvia. This indicates that not only grammatical structures and linguistic elements of the language are taught but intercultural competence is given greater attention in regular foreign language classes. As Teresa Tinsley indicates: "Intercultural competence is closely related to language, but is not strictly linguistic. It also has a citizenship dimension and underpins much of the Council of Europe's educational work in seeking to combat xenophobia and racism. Like languages, intercultural competence is important at different levels – it can affect individuals, organizations, communities and nations as a whole. At the interpersonal level, its absence can easily provoke conflict, misunderstanding, embarrassment, or disillusionment. They may have serious commercial or political implications translated to a professional environment." (Tinsley, 2003)

A more precise definition of intercultural competence has been given by Beacco,J.C. & Byram, M, (2007) as "Intercultural competence: combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours which allow a speaker, to varying degrees, to recognise, understand, interpret and accept other ways of living and thinking beyond his or her home culture. This competence is the basis of

understanding among people, and is not limited to language ability" (Beacco & Byram, 2007)"

Canale and Swain (1980) have identified three basic competences as parts of the communicative competence: "linguistic competence, discourse competence, and sociolinguistic competence. In other words, if the goal of the language course is to enable students to reach a level of communicative competence, then all three components are necessary." (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Support for communication space to develop intercultural competence

Language teachers are well prepared to deal with the linguistic: lexical, syntactical and grammatical structures of a language, as well as discourse analysis of a text. Sociolinguistic aspects with regard to the cultural items are well covered in text books and other resources.

Despite this preparedness for language teaching, teachers are increasingly apprehensive of the success of communicative encounters of their students outside their classrooms. "Of primary concern to us here is the extent to which language learners can be prepared for participation in a society which is multilingual and multicultural, or rather, the way in which language teachers can enrich the learning environment to help learners resolve the tensions they are likely to face in intercultural communication. Learning languages and appreciating cultural difference, being able to understand and acquire new languages and cultures are important targets in European education." (Grima Camilleri, 2002)

Understanding the culture that is different from the one the adult learner has grown up with, is a difficult task. "Successful intercultural communication, therefore, takes place when the foreign language learners' communication patterns and their understanding of the deeper structure of such patterns overlap sufficiently with those of the native speakers. Learners can normally achieve this over a period of time, at least as a starting point to what could more appropriately considered a life-long journey. Through varied communication encounters with native speakers, and through exposure to mass communication, the learners become more conscious of many of the actions and attitudes of the target language community." (Grima Camilleri, 2002)

Educational institutions could assume responsibility for creating opportunities for intercultural encounters in authenic language situations. "Creating spaces for intercultural dialogue is a collective task. Without appropriate, accessible and attractive spaces, intercultural dialogue will just not happen, let alone prosper. In this regard, the Council of Europe can again make a number of recommendations.

Public authorities and all social actors are invited to develop intercultural dialogue in the spaces of everyday life and in the framework of the respect of fundamental freedoms. There are unlimited possibilities for creating such spaces." (White Paper, 2008)

"Cultural activities can provide knowledge of diverse cultural expressions and so contribute to tolerance, mutual understanding and respect. Cultural

creativity offers significant potential to enhancing the respect of otherness." (White Paper, 2008)

Cultural Activities

In order to create and develop such spaces for language learners to raise their awareness of other cultures, it is necessary to organize intercultural encounters with them. This can be done by organizing the so-called language clubs with invited speakers and by inviting learners to attend regardless of their language proficiency levels.

According to Antoinette Grima Camilleri (2002), "Communication depends on speakers' and listeners' shared knowledge. It is facilitated by the extent to which we have similar meanings for terms we use and the behavioural norms we share. This, in turn, depends on both knowledge of language and knowledge of culture, or better still cultural awareness. "(Grima Camilleri, 2002). Teachers are aware that interacting in the foreign language with its native speakers is the best way for language learning. "However, the majority of language learners seek to acquire some competence in the foreign language before actually being in a position to interact with its native speakers. This is what most foreign language learning in schools is all about: a preparation for the eventual embarkation in the new environment." (Grima Camilleri, 2002)

When implementing classroom activities and exercises teachers normally focus on both accuracy and fluency or on promotion of communicative competence because it is assumed that a linguistic or grammatical base is necessary before communicative competence can be achieved. In intercultural encounters this is not the case: "This is a language area in which performance is not absolute and therefore we cannot expect all learners ever to acquire perfect native like behaviour. What we are after is the development of an awareness of sociocultural and sociolinguistic differences that might exist between one's first language and the target language. Such awareness will often help explain to both teachers and learners why sometimes there is unintended pragmatic failure and breakdown in communication. If we are aware of it, it might be easier to find the appropriate remedy." (Olshtain & Cohen, 1991)

The intercultural encounters at the language club events are as diverse as many fluent foreign language speakers are available, for example, at the Public Service English Language Cub events, which are regularly organized on last Friday of every month the following topics were offered:
- Courtney Kersten on "The Theater and Performing Arts Scene in the United States" , attended by 40 participants
- Janis Kramens on "What does you have in common with ewe, sue, goo, blew and bleu?", attended by 54 participants
- Eileen MacNaughton on " Learning the Language on Music", attended by 15 participants
- Janusz Kaminski on "Stress? What Stress?", attended by 25 participants

- Chris Beaty on "Early American Jazz", attended by 34 participants, etc. (PSLC web site: www.vmc.lv).

The reasons for choosing diverse topics for the English Club events are those which have been supported by Alan Rogers when he speaks of 'natural learning episodes', "those incidents in which adults throughout their lives engage in purposeful and structured learning using their own preferred learning style in order to achieve a particular goal or solve a specific problem." (Rogers, 1996)

Adult learners who have become language learners at language schools are well experienced in undertaking the tasks of learning, together with their teachers they have discovered their preferred learning styles, and they have developed their own learning strategies.

English Club events make learning into a process that is focused on specific contemporary issues, and adult learners choose topics that are relevant to them. The Public Service arranges different activities and invites different speakers that make possible to explore a wide range of issues. These talks are important for the PSLC adults' informal learning.

The ways in which adult learners interact with speakers and each other are influenced by:
- their life experiences
- their attitudes to learning
- their language proficiency levels as the club events do not discriminate the language proficiency levels and attendance is open, and the milieu approximates a real-life situation.

Speakers may be also drawn from the adult learners themselves, eliciting talks as diverse as travelling, or in some cases, the speakers are staff members who wish to share their experience of cross-cultural encounters in other countries. It has been observed when speakers come from outside organizations to speak on issues that affect not only the lives of the people in Latvia but also throughout the world, the attendance is greater.

Discussions at the English Club events are based on trial and error mode of learning as questions are not corrected as long as it is understandable and clear to the speaker of the particular Club event. Learners can fulfil their need to be active, not passive, recipients of information that is presented by the speaker at the event.

Support mechanisms created and funded by EU LLL Programme projects in Latvia

The project "FEEL the Language" was developed under the Socrates programme, Lingua 1, project No. 116589-CP-1-2004-1-LT-LINGUA-L1. The principal objective of the project was to provide basic knowledge on cultures and languages of what were then time twelve accession countries; the project was co-ordinated and submitted by the Regional Studies Department of Vytautas Magnus University. The project aimed at developing of different promotional materials that represented patterns of language use in real-life situations which helped both

teachers and learners realise the meaning of intercultural aspects of a language apart from linguistic ones.

A similar process-driven project was "Language Café" project under the Socrates programme, LINGUA 1, project No 230273-CP-1-2006-1-UK-LINGUA-L1PP. The main focus was on the development of Language Café activity itself rather than on the development of materials. The main aim of the project was to promote language learning, specifically less-widely used and less taught (LWULT) languages. The co-ordinating institution was the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies, University of Southampton.

The Language Café methodology included the following:

1. The identification of the location (cafeteria, library, community centres, college or university premises, etc.) in order to provide a supportive environment in which language learning can take place, recruitment of a facilitator, selection of languages, recruitment of learners.
2. Learner training in which student explored their own approach to learning, their use of language learning strategies, self-study techniques and language resources.
3. Assessment: learners were introduced to both formal and informal modes of assessment in order to make their choices on how to obtain feedback, record achievement and attain recognised qualifications. The Common European Framework of Reference was used as a common standard and the tools included European Language Portfolios, Dialang and recognition schemes.
4. Group management where the group decided how they wanted to proceed either nominating a group leader, or engaging a facilitator or a native speaker.
5. Monitoring and support for learning in the form of ELP or online resources were discussed, and feedback was regularly provided by the facilitator.

The project was innovative in that it was set up in an easily replicable, socially situated, learning environment that takes advantage of the growing popularity of café culture and promoted access to language learning for groups of learners who might not have the motivation, confidence or opportunity to learn in more formal situations.

The project involved nine participating institutions and the partner organization from Latvia was the Public service Language Centre. As a result of the project three language cafes were organized in four different parts of Riga: at the Riga Central Library, at the bookstore "Globuss", in the premises of the PSLC and at the Foreign language Library. Each language café had different functions with regard to the discussions topics of the particular language. To promote plurilingualism in the café events three languages were chosen for communication purposes: English, Latvian and German. In the result of a regular one year monthly language café event being held the most popular one that was well attended was the language café in English. As a result of holding a monthly language café event for one year, the one which continues to attract a large number of participants and which is still functioning in 2012 is the language café in English. (www.vmc.lv).

The fact that language club participants have been regular attendees of language club events for more than ten consecutive years confirms what Etienne and Jackson (2011) assert: "Lifelong learning can take many forms but may be best described as the learning that takes place throughout our lives and which is not necessarily accredited, tested or measured" (Etienne& Jackson, 2011). The task of every adult learning institution or centre is to offer this diversity of language learning forms.

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Silvija Karklina	PhD student, University of Latvia
	Public Service Language Centre,
	Kr. Barona street 64 -2 , Riga, LV1011, Latvia
	E-mail: silvija.karklina@vmc.lv