

We Are Europe

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We Are Europe – A project which brings Europe into the classroom

Language teaching should be more than implanting facts in students. It should encourage and enable students to follow their interests making use of their knowledge of languages and ICT. Being in contact with other European students they will be motivated to use foreign languages and they will get insight into a European dimension of teaching, learning and thinking.

Thus the classroom project We Are Europe came into being. It was carried out in a class 11 between January and March 2008.

Our project started with the question "The United States of Europe – our aim?" and a very lively discussion. Students' teams sent e-mails to our European partner schools in Thessaloniki (Greece), Menorca (Spain), Salamanca (Spain), Vammala (Finland), Peebles (Scotland) and Bialystok (Poland) to ask them this question and more in a questionnaire they had made themselves.

Having decided to participate in www.classroom4.eu, the students wrote two statements: one on what they think important about their home country, the second on what every young person in Europe should know about Europe.

For my classroom teaching, I not only used our textbook but also my Finnish colleague's EU material which gave us a different view and encouraged discussions about prejudices and stereotypes. Additional material from the official EU web site and from Europe-direct in Stuttgart was used to create wall displays on our European past and our partners.

When the schools from abroad sent back their photos and their answers to the questionnaires we were most surprised that the Polish students could easily see a "United States of Europe".

The most impressive event during the project was a visit to a Stuttgart school. In this multi-cultural class we were greeted by: "The Germans are here". In their talks and discussions, however, the students from both schools found out that many of their problems are the same although they come from different backgrounds and attend different types of schools. And what is more: my students realized that we have "little Europe" next door!

All teams made summaries of the questionnaires and of the students' answers. They then made short speeches to the others in the classroom.

Having found out so much about Europe and knowing so much about what others think about Europe, the students were given a creative task for team work: "Write a poem with eleven words about how you see Europe." In the next lesson these poems were recorded and then sent to the partner schools.

In the final discussion the students could state their impressions. Here is one statement which can stand for many: "I for myself think that it was very interesting to see what young Europeans from other countries think about Europe. Another interesting aspect of our project was the creating of posters and the writing of essays about Europe. In this way we learned a lot of exciting things about Europe and we could state our own opinions about a united Europe".

Introduction

As a teacher, I want my students to spend meaningful time in my classroom and to profit from my lessons so that they not only revise the subject matter for the next class test but can also use it in their future lives. Being a language teacher that means for me the following: Students should whenever possible be given tasks to carry out. Partners outside of school should be found to open the classrooms and to widen the students' outlook. Aims – like creating a web-site, preparing a slideshow, recording and presenting a poem, preparing a visit, a play, a multimedia-presentation should be defined and reached by the whole class.

If this is carried out in project-style teaching, in which groups of students take responsibility for their tasks and for their part of the project, all students can participate and contribute their share. There will be experts for languages, there will be experts for multimedia, there will be students who are good at organizing – together they can reach ambitious aims and will learn from each other and with each other. The teacher, having well prepared the material, the contacts and the whole outline of the project, will do a certain number of lessons with the whole class, whereas in other phases he will mainly supervise the groups' work. By working together with international partners, the use of languages comes natural, the students' own curiosity about how others live and what goes on elsewhere is aroused. Exchanging e-mails, writing summaries and essays are no longer seen as boring school tasks but as a means to tell the others in the class more about their field of expertise.

Including media in whichever form in a project means that the students' every day life is taken seriously. They live in a media world: they are surrounded by music, they spend hours in front of their computers, they are members of communities like facebook, they watch films and shows on a daily basis. We can use this consumer knowledge in our classroom, in project work. We can turn some of it into creative energy so that students produce their own media products. By doing this, they will find out that media can manipulate: by showing certain pictures and emphasising certain facts, one can misrepresent reality. They will also find out more about the legal situation: you have to ask permission and be given consent before you publish somebody's picture or work, music is protected by GEMA rights. They will also find out that a short film clip or audio recording, for example, involves a lot of revision and rehearsal. Without complaining they will say their texts ten or more times – they all want to have a perfect result in the end! How often do we achieve that in the language classroom?

I would also like to emphasize that project work should not be used as a time-filler at the end of the school year. Its topic should be a relevant topic within the curriculum – just the way of doing the tasks and of dealing with the subject matter should be different.

By describing some aspects of the project *We Are Europe* I want to show how project-style teaching can work. I will also include some results and comments.

We Are Europe, One way of doing a media-based international project

Our European partners, stereotypes about them, and our way towards Europe are part of the curriculum. Why not use international links and turn this topic into a real European experience instead of only analysing cartoons and graphs, and summarizing political texts and timelines? This does not mean that all this will be neglected, it will have to be done as well, but in a different context.

Essay writing was done while each student answered these two questions for publication on the website www.classroom4.eu : *What would you want other young Europeans to know about your country?* And: *What do you think all young people in the EU should know about Europe?* Some write a lot more than the expected 200 words for each essay. They point out the democratic political system, the fact that in Germany a woman chancellor is head of government, but also successful sports events and cultural achievements. For the second task they all agree that there should be some basic knowledge on how Europe came into being and which important events took place in the member countries. Environmental awareness, cultural diversity and international sports events are mentioned, but above all the need to achieve a feeling of community, togetherness.

Data and information are collected and analyzed when teams create posters and wall displays on "Our way towards Europe". In this phase not only our school book but also Finnish material on Europe is used. It is supplemented by informative booklets in English which we got from the Stuttgart office of the organisation Europe.direct, and by publications on the website of the European Parliament www.europarl.europa.eu.

Cartoons and statements on stereotypes are discussed, analysed and evaluated – by using Finnish classroom material. This gives a new angle and makes the class wonder why Germans are not mentioned in the text! Let's have a look at the text:

"Multicultural business teams in the Nordic-Baltic area

Following a shipwreck, eighteen men find themselves marooned on a desert island. Two are Englishmen, two French, two Italians, two Venezuelans, two Russians, two Finns, two Swedes, two Danes and two Norwegians. How will they cooperate?

The Englishmen soon set about claiming the western half of the island for the British Empire, hoisting a Union Jack and establishing a monarchy. Meanwhile on the eastern half, the French set up the sixth Republic. The Nordics in turn go to live with the Brits, while the Italians, Venezuelans and Russians prefer the French Republic.

The western half functions well. The British allow the Swedes to set up a welfare state, the Finns cut down the palm trees, and the Danes form a trading company to export coconuts. The Norwegians keep out of everybody's way by staying on the beach where they claim offshore fishing and oil rights. On the eastern half of the island the French institute the Napoleonic code, whereupon the Russians stage a coup d'état and topple the government. The Venezuelans start selling Venezuelan passports. One of the Italians flees to the British zone, ostensibly to seek asylum but mainly so he can discuss the political situation with the other Italian on his mobile phone.

The incessant ringing of phones and Mediterranean chatter annoys the Finns so much that they hastily build a raft out of the tree trunks, make a sail out of the British flag, and drift happily off into the sunset. "(Blue Planet, Book 8, pp. 66-67)

This text gives much food for discussions as it shows set images. It points out the traditional roles of the British and the French as colonisers and territorial administrators, it shows the low legal consciousness and antipathy to the state of the Russians and the Venezuelans. The Swedish longing for security and harmony is contrasted with Finnish pragmatism and inventiveness. The Danes' interest in commerce and the Norwegians' preference of turning to the sea is shown. Italians are presented as voluble and communicative thus driving away the Finns who love tranquillity.

Why aren't there any Germans in the story? Maybe out of political correctness: any allusion to our Nazi past is avoided.

But when developing their questionnaires for the students in our partner countries, the students use less restraint. They ask questions like: *What do you think of the role of the Germans in the Second World War?* They also want to know: *Where do you prefer to spend your holidays? What do you do at the weekends?* And: *What do you think life is like in Germany?* One question is asked by all teams: *Can you image a "United States of Europe?"*

The teams get various and sometimes surprising answers from their partners via e-mail. The Polish students favour a United Europe above all, whereas others foresee difficulties on the way towards more unity. The Greek final year students complain about not having much free time: their private tuition and preparation courses for university take up much time. They feel obliged to complement their school lessons by extra tuition otherwise their marks do not suffice for university admittance and acceptance. The results of these questionnaires are summarized by the teams, presented to the whole class and also published on www.classroom4.eu. The photos of the foreign teams are displayed on the classroom walls.

A highlight is the making and recording of a "Elfchen", a poem with eleven words arranged in this way: the first line consists of one word, the title of the poem; there are two words in line two, three in line three and four in line four; line five concludes and summarizes or comments the poem in one word.

The students work in groups and prepare their poems. While all are rehearsing, two students who have been trained to use the free audio software *Audacity*, set up the technical equipment: a laptop and a microphone. Then the groups first present their poems to the class, then the poems are recorded and later sent to the partners abroad. Here is one example:

Europe
People together
Different cultures together
Living and learning together
Community.

The biggest eye-opener however is a visit to a Hauptschule in Stuttgart and discussing European and other topics in groups. On our arrival we are announced with the words "Die Deutschen kommen" (The Germans are here). True. Only two students in their multicultural class have both parents with German background. But when discussing Europe and then their school and private lives the students realize that although they come from different backgrounds and attend different types of school their problems and wishes are not so far apart: they want to have a fulfilling job and a happy partnership in a stable and secure environment. And, surprisingly: the students with a Turkish background are not keen on Turkey as a member of the EU.

All the information collected and all these experiences can be used for the class test in which the students are to state their own perception of Europe, furthermore they are to describe the project, point out what impressed them most and give an assessment of the project's impact on their lives. Matthias, for example, says about Europe: "My own thoughts about Europe are that Europe should be more united, like the USA. But a "United Europe" should be a federal Europe, like Germany, which consists of many smaller countries like Bavaria, Hamburg and Baden-Wuerttemberg. I think it is important that all Europeans speak and understand one language (English), but that they can still speak their mother tongue. So they can understand each other, but their cultures and languages also stay alive."

Lukas mentions prejudices and the results of the questionnaires. "The answers we got were very interesting because we could see that we have many things in common with other young Europeans, e.g. favourite TV series, social life, prejudices. The most interesting part of the project was to read and sum up the questionnaires, because there were very good and interesting answers we could discuss, and sometimes we were really surprised about what they had answered, because we had expected different answers. But exactly that was so interesting, we really got to know new things about life in the different countries, and some prejudices were discovered to be wrong". "For me, the cooperation with other students in Europe and with the pupils from the Ostheimschule was the most interesting aspect", says Sarah. Andrea explains that "at the end of the project we summarized the answers from our new friends in the other countries and read them in front of the class and a film team. This was a lesson about Europe with medias and most interesting for me." Carolin says: "We talked of a 'United States of Europe'. This stage was very interesting for me: to hear what other students in my class think about it." And Elke explains: "In my opinion these different answers, above all the unexpected ones, were the most interesting part of the whole project. Now we know a lot more about what other European pupils think than we knew when we started our project."

Conclusion

These statements show students who are enthusiastic about the new things they found out and learned. They have been using English as a lingua franca when communicating with students abroad, matter-of-factly, not worrying all the time about linguistic correctness: they simply want to be understood. They wait for answers to their questions which they then discuss eagerly in their groups, overlooking spelling errors and mistakes. They all discover and experience Europe in these project-style lessons.

Yes, including partners outside the classroom, creating relevant tasks and working with media means careful preparation and extra time, but one is paid back doubly by motivated and keen students whose commitment to English and learning does not end with the project.

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