

## Inter<sup>2</sup> - Promoting Digital Competences as a Tool to Overcome Cultural Barriers Among European Citizens

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### Abstract

*The Lifelong Learning Project Inter<sup>2</sup> started in September 2008 and ended in May 2010, as a collaboration between Finnish, Flemish, Italian and German adult education providers. We used the online platform Moodle to create virtual language classes in which learners from different countries and with different cultural backgrounds were able to introduce themselves and discuss some topics. In order to facilitate discussions we limited the number of topics to two, Cooking Square and Theatre Square. Cooking Square basically is a forum where learners exchange typical recipes. They talk about the ingredients and the way to prepare it. Often a video shows the learners at work in the kitchen and commenting on what they do in the language they learn. Language learners in the partner institutions consult the forum, comment on the video's, ... Theatre Square involved English learners who wanted to experience learning through acting.*

*Each country choose a fairy tale typical for their region, translated it into English and sent it to one partner school. They exchanged their views on theatre, costumes, staging, ... The finale was an international theatre weekend in Tübingen (Germany), where each country staged the fairy tale from another partner.*

*We would like to show you how we integrated as much as possible the virtual classrooms in the "normal" classroom. The learners not only developed their communicative proficiency but also completed some activities in reading, writing and formulating their ideas. From a pedagogical point of view the Inter<sup>2</sup> project supported the ungoing teaching activities: teaching a (foreign) language is all about proposing methods and training skills to guide learners through the learning process.*

### 1. Introduction

Inter<sup>2</sup> is the result of a Grundtvig contact seminar in Volterra, Italy, in 2008, where partners from Germany, Italy, Belgium, Finland, Greece and Spain met. It became clear from the start that the integration of ICT in the classroom had to be functional: we wanted to use ICT as a pedagogical tool to involve learners in a more active way. We definitely didn't want to use ICT just to use ICT: the link with the classroom practice was the basis of our project. Two other focuses for the partners in this project were the user-generated content and the choice of the platform. If we wanted learners to communicate, we had to choose an electronic platform. To compare and choose the right platform for the purposes of the project would be our first task in Inter<sup>2</sup>. Secondly, the users of the platform had to be able to generate the content themselves. We saw the project as a means to facilitate the learning process, where learners can learn from each other. By the end of the contact seminar, we had decided on two subjects for virtual classes and four electronic platforms to compare. Unfortunately the Greek and Spanish partner didn't make it to the end of the application, so we were four partners to meet in Tampere, Finland for the kick-off meeting in November 2009.

## **2. The choice of the platform**

Since two partners were familiar with Moodle we started to develop the project's structure using this electronic platform. In the meanwhile we examined three other platforms: Dokeos, Ilias and eFront. Some of them, especially Dokeos, didn't differ that much from Moodle and might be useful in this project too. Anyway, we stuck to Moodle as it is more widespread and well known. During our first meeting in Finland, the Finnish partner gave us a course on how to use Moodle. The most difficult part about the platform was the choice of the overall structure. As we had decided already on two virtual squares, we still needed to fill them in and make it user friendly. Learners who never used electronic platforms would have to do so, our role as teachers was to make them at ease and help them to express themselves on the platform.

## **3. Cooking Square**

### **3.1 Introduction**

As the four partners have a public composed of learners with a similar background we tried to find some common themes that might interest all our learners. Many students find their way to our language schools after savouring culturally distinct flavours while on holiday abroad and because they have become curious about those foreign tastes. It wasn't really difficult to find the first virtual classroom: Cooking Square. Most learners in our institutions learn a foreign language because they want to go on holidays, talk to other people, visit other countries, taste other cultures. In Cooking Square we tried to combine gastronomy and foreign language learning. We wanted the learners to exchange recipes, learn more about the cultural heritage of the other European countries and discuss. Learners from Finland would discuss recipes in Italian with learners from Belgium. We settled for exchanges in Italian, German, French, Spanish, Flemish, English and Finnish.

Cooking Square started in October 2009. In order to have vivid discussions and make it all practical we filmed some of recipes.

### **3.2 An example: the Italian class**

Preparation

- decide which recipes we were going to execute
- exercises on the vocabulary and grammar to be used during the video
- rehearsal



Fig. 1 Preparing an Italian dish 1

In the video we see some learners preparing fresh pasta. The ingredients are shown clearly, the 'cooks' explain what they are doing. The video can be used for educational purposes later on, in any language class. For example the sound can be switched off so the learners have to say which utensils they see, what happens, what might happen next,... When we finished the video some learners put the recipe on the Cooking Square forum. Then we had to wait for the comments of the learners in our partner institutions. The Finnish learners replied that it was quite difficult for them to prepare the recipe as they didn't know which wine they'd choose. Another Finnish learner said most Fins don't prepare the pasta themselves but buy it in the supermarket instead.

The learners who participated in this class were quite excited and felt extremely involved. The language classes in which they had to choose to recipe, look up the ingredients and make up their mind on how they were going to introduce the subject helped them to learn and integrate the vocabulary on the road. They didn't feel as if they were learning the items by heart: they used the vocabulary in a natural way and posted some other recipes later on.

### 3.3 Problems on the road

As we moved on into Cooking Square we realized the involvement of learners and teachers wasn't as smooth as we'd expected. Especially the German partner had many difficulties to find teachers who wanted to participate. As a matter of fact no German learner ever posted a comment and only one teacher posted a recipe. The structure of the German partner institution is quite particular: although this school has many learners all over Germany, the teachers are all free-lance. As they didn't receive any financial compensation for the project, they were reluctant to participate. During our meeting in February 2010 we felt Cooking Square needed to be reoriented, as there was not enough communication between the learners. Since the Italian class worked out quite well, the virtual classes in Cooking Square were limited to Italian. We didn't continue the other languages. Learners from the four participating institutions had to put together a menu in Italian. Italian native speakers would provide the appetizers, Flemish learners the first course, Germans the main course and Finnish



deserts. They had to find typical recipes for their own country, with ingredients which might be hard to find abroad. In that case learners couldn't but ask each other what kind of substitutes they could use, where they could find them, etc.. In this "Recipe of the month" the Italian native speaker used so many typical ingredients that the other learners actually overwhelmed him with questions. Where do we find Tuscan bread? Which cheese can I use instead of stracchino? Some learners even put pictures of the result on the forum. The partners in the project were relieved to pump up Cooking Square in this way.

## 4. Theatre Square

### 4.1 Introduction

From the beginning the four partners wanted to enhance the knowledge of cultural heritage between the learners. Next to Cooking Square we wanted to create a virtual class in which learners would be able to talk about their own culture, share cultural expressions and learn about the others. Theatre seemed to be an excellent tool: even learners with a limited knowledge of the language can participate at theatre plays and be part of the project. Unlike Cooking Square where we started with different languages, we believed one foreign language would be easier to work with. Theatre Square was developed in the English class. The frame for Theatre Square was created during our meeting in Florence, May 2009.



Fig. 2 Theatre Square platform

### 4.2 Fairy tales

In January 2010 the classes started in the four partner institutions. First learners met and learned how to work with the platform in Moodle. Each partner had a specific class with an ICT-teacher to orientate the learners. Their first assignment was to introduce themselves in order to get to know the others. They had to write a text explaining why they choose this project, what they thought of it and what they expected to learn. More than 40 adult learners enrolled in the project. During the first lessons they got to know each other, learned about group dynamics and improvisation and exercised some basic theatre techniques. Later on each country choose a typical fairy tale, translated it into English and sent



it to another partner. The Flemish sent their tale to the Finns, the Finns to the Germans, the Germans to the Italians and the Italians to the Flemish. Coached by the English teachers, sometimes even assisted by drama teachers, the learners then had to rewrite the text into a play and make a scenario of it. In March they used the forum to exchange ideas on the characters. The dramatization of the play was put on the platform and as such visible for anyone. If someone felt the play didn't correspond to the meaning of the fairy tale this was to be discussed in the forum. In April the learners started to rehearse the play and make suggestions about the costumes, the music, the props, ... In the meanwhile learners had had several occasions to meet, virtually or for real. In February the German group came to Leuven, in Belgium, for the third meeting. They followed some workshops together with the Flemish. The Italians and the Germans met a few times making use of video conferencing.

### **4.3 The finale**

After 5 months of rehearsing, talking about cultural differences and similarities, exchanging views on theatre and on these specific plays, participants were ready for the final meeting in Tübingen (Germany) in May 2010. Two days filled with theatre and culture, it seemed the best way to conclude the Inter<sup>2</sup> project. The actors spent the first day rehearsing and getting familiar with the stage, on Sunday they performed the fairy tales before a real audience. Learners were curious about the outcomes of the fairy tale they sent to the partner. It was amazing to see how learners had tried to understand the historical and cultural background of the fairy tale and thus transformed this into a play.

## **5. Pedagogical value of the project**

### **5.1 a tool to improve foreign language skills**

Inter<sup>2</sup> clearly focused on the improvement of learners' foreign language skills. Communication is the main target in our language classes and Inter<sup>2</sup> proved to be an excellent instrument to enhance communication. Learners had to introduce themselves, talk about ingredients, about their own culture and interests in the language they were learning. At the same time they were able to exchange views and experiences with learners in other countries. We used the LLP mobilities for the final meeting in Germany: 14 Flemish, 10 Italian and 7 Finnish learners met their German fellow actors at the international theatre weekend. Without the formal structure of the Learning Partnership it would have been harder to organize such an event. In an informal way learners gradually increased their linguistic expertise. Where the participants in Cooking Square could think the recipes over and submit corrections, the actors in Theatre Square gained a better English knowledge thanks to one-to-one conversation with their peers. They were "forced" to explain the choices of costumes, music, characters, etc... Even if the participants' language levels didn't always correspond the participants overcame linguistic barriers thanks to the mutual desire to understand each other and work together on the project.

### **5.2 a tool to improve ICT skills**

Just as for the language level not all learners were as competent in ICT. All learners had an introduction in the use of Moodle, the possibilities to exchange information and ask questions in the forum. Both participants in Cooking Square and Theatre Square were supposed to post comments and reactions on the electronic platform. Some of them did it easily, others hesitated and limited the posts to one or two. This doesn't necessarily mean participants didn't improve their ICT skills. Posting a recipe and reading the comments from other participants might help the learners to catch up with ICT later on.

### **5.3 a tool to produce user-generated content**

In this project the teacher's role was merely to be a coach and assist the learners during the process. Especially in Cooking Square the importance of the learners' input isn't to be underestimated. They selected the recipes, looked up the ingredients, decided on the scenario if the recipe was to be filmed,



wrote down the recipes in the forum and reacted to the comments. The teacher might suggest some directions or give feedback but didn't interfere.

#### **5.4 a tool to increase European consciousness**

Since the Inter<sup>2</sup> project was funded by the European Commission one of the main purposes was to reinforce European awareness of the participants and intensify cultural exchange. We feel that by choosing two arguments, gastronomy and theatre, close to the participants' interests and likely to stimulate interaction we gave the learners the opportunity to become more aware of their European citizenship. In Cooking Square cultural differences were shared and more than once differences didn't appear to be that huge. It was remarkable to see how recipes travel Europe, with some small alterations. A common European background was the basis of Theatre Square: good and evil often compete and in spite of local details and characters the overall narration is universal. Participants often felt surprised when realizing the fairy tales were so close to the ones they grew up with.

### **6. Conclusion**

Inter<sup>2</sup> focused on different objectives, improving the language skills of the participants was one of them. We tried to integrate as much as possible the virtual classrooms in the "normal" classroom. As far as Cooking Square is concerned, learners had to learn the specific vocabulary related to cooking, food, preparing dishes etc. before they could start to use the online-platform. They also needed to learn the specific grammar. Once they gathered enough information they could start to think of recipes and carry them out. They wrote the recipes in class, searched for information on the internet together and worked together on the final recipe which they put on the online-platform. Undoubtedly the fact that the recipes would be prepared later by the students encouraged them to find out more about ingredients, utensils, ... Focusing on the cooking enhanced the learners' motivation and helped them to express themselves in a foreign language. The learners involved in Theatre Square participated at an English course on theatre. Some of them already had some previous experience but for most reading, dramatizing and staging a play was something completely new. They managed to combine their interest in theatre with improving their skills in English. Thanks to the assignments on the online-platform learners also had to write to their European partners and exchange information in English. They thus not only developed their communicative proficiency but also completed some activities in reading, writing and formulating their ideas. As stated above, from a pedagogical point of view the Inter<sup>2</sup> project supported the regular teaching activities: teaching a (foreign) language is all about proposing methods and training skills to guide learners through the learning process.

### **References**

[1] The project's website is [www.inter2.eu](http://www.inter2.eu)

[2] You'll find the Italian class on [www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rNRDO0QrhU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rNRDO0QrhU)