

Job-Oriented Language Learning in the Context of Intercultural and Professional Competency Development

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It is not enough to take steps which may some day lead to a goal; each step must itself be both a step as well as a goal.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

1. Introduction

It can't be denied that language learning is the major tool for effecting successful mobility and thus imperative for all mobility students. Yet it is still identified as the biggest barrier to be overcome. Once this compelling leap has been made, however, mobility can develop far more easily than expected.

Having this insight in mind, the Compass Project partners let themselves be guided by the idea to render language learning more objective-oriented while being embedded in a broader context.

Consequently, the Compass Project became focussed on four key competences, considering language as one part, but related to personal, social and intercultural skills. This contextual environment is meant to have a strong impact on the process of language learning, allowing it to become more directed to self-imposed goals.

1.1 Project background

Given the aim to enable 80,000 people in Europe per year to participate in vocational mobility programmes until 2013, the Leonardo-da-Vinci-Mobility programme's promotion is continuously growing year by year. With the beginning of the new program generation 2007-2013, the application of so-called "pool projects" was made possible. A higher figure of job placements available should thus particularly encourage the mobility of individual participants (free movers) within the EU.

For the participating organisations this means heavier challenges in organising mobility programmes: they have to adjust their job placement schemes to a wider range of participants with individual requirements, experience, educational needs and commercial interests. Quality criteria set up for "pool projects" prescribe, next to nation-wide accessibility, also publication of representative statements with regards to contents and aims of the relevant stay abroad, thus rendering selection criteria more transparent. Personal selection and counselling interviews are to be conducted with the participants in order to guarantee fitting individual placements in the respective internship companies. This however results in several difficulties due to the structure of mobility programmes:

In the case of a vacant position, the contact between the posting institution and the applicant is generally limited to a short period. Normally the assessment of educational and qualification needs can only to a limited degree be based on experience and observations from previous learning processes. As a consequence and due to such compressed preparation time, there is a tendency to only consider participants who are, due to already existing qualifications, deemed to certainly meet the requirements of the admitting institution. In contrast, participants are disadvantaged if they do not submit adequate track records or if they are unable to formulate goals in connection with their job placement abroad.

This reduces participation opportunities for those participants:

- without completed vocational training or with little practical knowledge,
- who are unemployed or currently in a phase of professional re-orientation,
- who are not integrated into vocational or further training. Thus educational and qualification needs cannot be substantiated in advance and learning achievements cannot be directly stabilised and credited after the stay abroad.

Although practical professional tasks are a major characteristic of job placements abroad, interviews with former participants confirm that they typically considered their stay abroad rather as being particularly benefiting the development of personal and social capabilities. This is a positive result, however it does not always meet the expectations of the posting companies and prospective employers. The reason is that the added value of a job placement abroad increases with the latter's duration: only then do participants have the opportunity to get familiar with complex subject areas and tasks as a "team member". Only a longer placement enables them to make extensive use of their knowledge and skills on a practical professional level. On the other hand, this impedes groups of people who do not meet the requirements for longer stays abroad, due to their unfavourable socio-economical background.

Here the survey on the impacts of Leonardo da Vinci mobility programs presses for special actions. It was identified as important:

- a) to enhance preparations and mentoring of mobility programmes, particularly to win over target groups with an unfavourable socio-economic background for job placements abroad,
- b) to adjust the choice of admitting companies and to provide greater detail of learning achievements, since generally, the value of mere job placement and participation certificates cannot be [fully] assessed by prospective employers.

It is true that the Europass Mobility envisages the listing of competences achieved. However, the description of the latter remains with the supporting organisations. Thus, in the European context, transparency and usability are limited, if the completion of a job placement abroad does not directly result in transfer to the salary payroll or if consolidation and acceptance of learning achievements cannot be obtained in follow-up professional development. The positive vocational impact of staying abroad would thus be used only on a limited scale.

In the process, there is an increase in significance of key capabilities for raising the educational level and procurement of high-quality jobs. The recommendations for key capacities and life-long learning made by the European Parliament and the Council postulate as a goal for European educational policy to enable everyone to develop and update suitable key capacities, required for everyday life, learning and career. There is increasing expectation for people to dispose not only of adaptability but also flexibility, entrepreneurial spirit, capacity for innovation, creativity, own responsibility and personal motivation. In order to get along in an ever more networked world, people should be able to retrieve and make reasonable use of available information by means of interactive media and communications. They should be in a position to interact with people from different cultures and within heterogeneous social groups. In order to adapt to changes, the capacity of reflexive thinking and actions is also required. This should not exclusively serve routine application but also enable applied adaptation of tools, methods and pro-active approaches. Job placements abroad provide excellent opportunities for training and verifying related skills.

Thus there is need for mobility projects to better display the connection between personal capability gains and corresponding vocational impacts in order to improve accreditation and use of learning achievements. The listing of job - relevant tasks carried out during the internship should be complemented by indications of language and cultural capacities, i.e. the ability to apply individual

knowledge and skills in a flexible and situational way, adapted to intercultural contexts and with a work-related purpose.

1.2 Implementation

This is where the starting point of the project was. A trans-nationally adjusted framework had to be developed by means of the definition and documentation aids. Between the partners, this framework helped facilitate the adjustment of learning goals and requirement profiles for European mobility projects. As of then, this framework has supported to describe learning achievements with regards to job specific, as well as inter-cultural capacity gains. Since these are presented in six European languages, topics of job placements agreed upon together with the participants can be submitted to the admitting institutions and companies more easily. Likewise, acquired learning achievements can be re-translated more easily and can in turn be certified in the Europass Mobility by the relevant sending institution.

In order to facilitate the application of the definition and documentation aid, the creation of an online database was realised. By means of an „e-portfolio“, occupational capacity and job profiles can be pooled together with greater flexibility. In contrast to previous processes, the advantage lies in the fact that the adjustment process between all trans-national mobility program participants can be designed interactively. Thus adjustment, adding of content and learning goals can be carried out continuously and according to feedback.

For the listing of learning achievements, the definition and documentation aid creates the foundation to which the occupational and inter-cultural capacities obtained in the job placements can be allocated. They can be harmonised between the participating companies, organisations and participants, in order to encourage the mutual acceptance of learning achievements in a trans-national context.

2. The “Compass data base tool”

The procedure of the Compass data base tool starts out with the creation of a portfolio each applicant is entitled to do in English and/or in any other target language. He or she is forced to self – assess his or her capabilities by being frank with oneself rather than being tempted to present a high-gloss profile.

Based upon this approach, learning agreements will be reconciled with the sending organisation and adjusted according to the needs of the placement. The new idea here is to increase the student’s level of awareness and responsibility concerning his aims, having considerably more influence on one’s learning progress.

In fact, there is no demand for perfection but for graded capabilities like the ability to communicate and to stay motivated to achieve self-imposed goals, putting an emphasis on self-imposed.

Given this context, it has often been seen in the past that self-imposed expectations have been surpassed significantly. Even if the goals haven’t been entirely met e.g. language level, many applicants have the impression that they are coming home with good feelings in terms of motivation, no matter how much they have actually achieved. Moreover, in hindsight many students would like to go on intensifying their learning process after their stay abroad.

Considering that language learning in the long run is time-consuming, hence demanding stamina, and difficult to realise prior to a mobility programme, and still not accomplished during the stay abroad, the idea is to let it become part of an overall learning process and decouple it from time and place.

Students have a tendency to be rather motivated before they leave, and interestingly often stop learning actively, e.g. online etc., when they are at the place of their internship.

In order to keep them on track, hence motivated from the beginning to the end of a mobility programme and beyond, at the end they will receive a certificate based on the learning agreements displaying in their portfolio which can always be re-assessed throughout their carrier.

2.1. Illustration of the “Spider Webs”

The tool that has been developed to underpin this demand is the Compass data base tool which appears as a radar system in so-called “Spider Webs”, illustrating the applicant’s four key competences. Its purpose is to keep all mobility bodies involved in a dialogue, to raise transparency and to provide the applicant with the chance to closely survey this procedure by comparing his results appearing in the “Spider Webs” from the beginning of his application to the end and beyond. The “Spider Webs” serve demonstrating grades, even little bits, that – without this tool - risk getting either lost or forgotten due to the long period of time. For self-assessment students use recognised competence descriptions that have been developed in a number of European settings:

- Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
- European Qualifications Framework
- The Definition and Selection of Key Competences (DeSeCo), OECD

Language and professional competences:

This figure (fig.1) displays a radar view (spider web.1) with the language and work-related competences of the student, who is entering a work placement abroad. Three areas deal with language skills (understanding, speaking and conversation), and three areas deal with professional skills (mathematical, information technology and tools, machines & work methods).

Each description is filled out using an indication of level 0 through 6, zero denoting no skills and six indicating a very high competence.

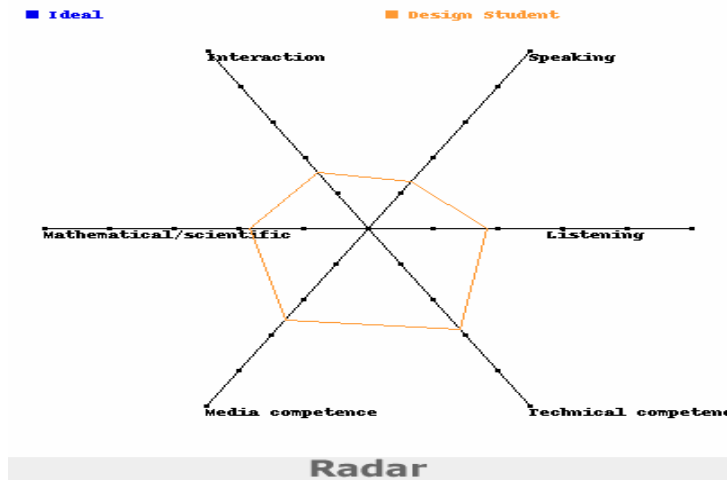


Fig. 1

Social and personal competences:

This figure (fig.2) shows a radar view (spider web.2) of social and personal competences of the student, who is entering a work placement abroad. Three areas deal with social competences (participating, staying in dialogue, supporting) and three areas deal with personal competences (intercultural knowledge, determination and self-knowledge).

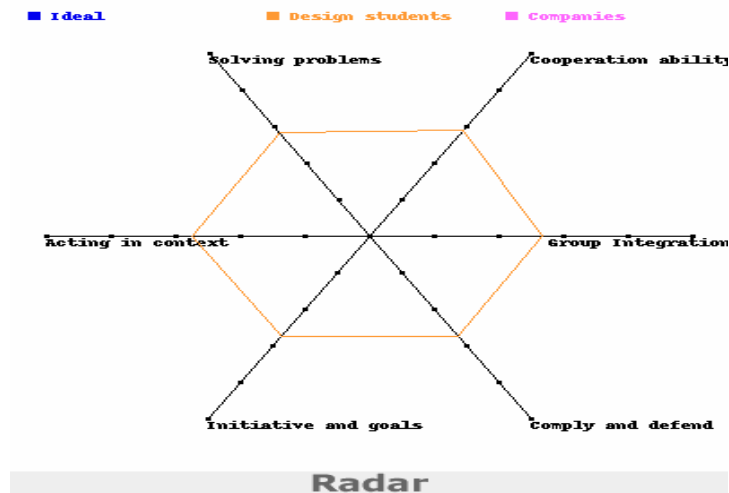


Fig.2

2.2 Results

The Compass data base is a sensible, innovative and interactive tool gathering and illustrating both empirical (personal and social) and objectively measurable (language and professional) skills of a student over a longer period of time. It enhances the student's ability to assess and re-assess himself according to the recognised competence descriptions incorporating language learning with other vocational qualifications.

The advantage for the partner organisations is that they are gaining time while using the tool and while monitoring their students. Furthermore, the tool helps a wider range of students to be promoted, as is intended by the European Commission, and to become more easily observed and recognised with their individual requirements, experience and needs.

It enables the organisations to evaluate comparable and measurable inroads made by the students and additionally save these results for statistical evaluation, thus creating a sustainable data track for further improvements.

The added value of the tool for the students is the idea to become more of a self-reflective and independent learner, having also the chance to be monitored in case of need.

Finally, it can be stated, that the initial purpose of the project has in fact developed into the overall benefit of the Compass data base tool: to better display the connection between all four competences as demonstrated in the radar system in order to improve accreditation and use of obtained achievements.

3. Bibliography

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