The ''Teddy Bear'' Project - Developing Intercultural Communication Competence through eTwinning

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SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU

UČITELJSKI FAKULTET

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SAŽETAK

U današnje vrijeme napredne tehnologije i globalizacije, rano učenje engleskog kao stranog jezika gotovo je neizbježno, posebice ako se teži akademskom i profesionalnom uspjehu pojedinca. Kontinuiranim porastom upotrebe engleskog jezika širom svijeta, učenici vrlo rano moraju usvojiti temelje stranog jezika i osnovne kompetencije istoga kako bi bila spremna za potencijalne izazove u budućnosti. S ciljem poboljšanja postojećeg kurikula u Republici Hrvatskoj, Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja istaknulo je važnost razvoja međukulturne kompetencije učenika već u ranom učenju stranoga jezika. Zaključci mnogih studija otkrivaju nesumnjivu korist izlaganja mladih polaznika kulturnim raznolikostima, omogućavajući razvoj neophodnih kompetencija kao što su razumijevanje različitosti, empatičnost i prihvaćanje drugih kultura. Modernizacijom obrazovnog sustava učitelji pronalaze brojne prednosti provođenja nastave uz pomoć tehnologije. Kao rezultat toga, eTwinning platforma postupno je stekla popularnost, kombinirajući brojne korisne resurse za učenje aktivnim sudjelovanjem u međunarodnim projektima.

Cilj ovog rada je opisati jedan od mnogih projekata pokrenutih zahvaljujući spomenutoj platformi te utvrditi pozitivne i moguće negativne aspekte provođenja istoga u razrednoj nastavi. Projekt je proveden u dvije države, Hrvatskoj i Nizozemskoj, te je uključivao učenike u dobi od 9 do 11 godina. Također, projekt je proveden kao potencijalno istraživanje važnosti razvijanja digitalnih kompetencija učenika te međukulturnih komunikacijskih kompetencija kada je u pitanju učenje stranoga, u ovom slučaju engleskog, jezika. Služeći se brojnim istraživanjima provedenim tijekom nekoliko desetljeća globalizacije učenja engleskog jezika, ovaj rad potvrđuje pretežito pozitivne ishode uvrštavanja sličnih projekata u redovnu nastavu ili izvannastavne aktivnosti.

Ključne riječi: eTwinning, kurikul, međukulturna komunikacijska kompetencija, projekt, strani jezik

SUMMARY

Learning English as a foreign language early in life is almost impossible to escape in this day and age of advanced technology and globalization, especially if an individual aspires to achieve academic and professional success. Due to the constant rise of English language usage around the world, children have to learn the basics of the foreign language and acquire elementary competences early in life in order to be prepared for potential future challenges. To improve the existing curriculum, the importance of developing intercultural competence even in early foreign language learning was emphasized by the Ministry of Science and Education in Croatia. Studies have found that young learners unquestionably benefit from being exposed to cultural diversity and that it enables them to develop necessary competences like empathy, understanding differences and accepting other cultures. Through the modernization of the education system, teachers have found numerous advantages of technology-assisted learning. As a result, the eTwinning platform has slowly gained popularity by combining all beneficial assets for learning through active participation in international projects.

The aim of this thesis is to describe one of many projects that were initiated owing to the above-mentioned platform and to establish positive and negative aspects of its implementation in primary classroom teaching. The project took part in two countries, Croatia and the Netherlands, and included students aged 9 to 11. The project was also carried out as a potential research on importance of developing pupils' digital competences and intercultural communication competences in relation to foreign language learning, in this case, English. Consulting numerous studies conducted during several decades of global English as foreign language learning, the thesis confirms predominantly positive outcomes of implementing similar projects into regular lessons or extracurricular activities.

Keywords: eTwinning, curriculum, intercultural competence, project, foreign language

INTRODUCTION

An early start has proven to be a relevant factor when it comes to success and positive attitudes toward foreign language learning both in Croatia and worldwide (e.g., Mihaljević Djigunović & Letica Krevelj, 2009; Nikolov, 2002). For decades, educators had been mastering new approaches and methods for foreign language learning while simultaneously searching for contemporary improvements. In order to fully incorporate all fundamental elements of foreign language learning, teachers are eager to find innovative and entertaining ways to foster students' intercultural competence. Introducing students, teachers and schools to the *eTwinning* platform brings a solution to inadequate cultural awareness and diversity among educational environments.

The main objective of this graduate thesis is to describe the importance of developing intercultural competence whilst learning English as a foreign language through new platforms on the Internet, in this case, the eTwinning platform. The first part of the paper introduces and describes crucial elements of foreign language learning in schools in three chapters. The first chapter addresses research and conclusions related to the improvement of foreign language learning, the issues of finding the appropriate age for FL learning, as well as the establishment and evolution of the Faculty of Teacher Education. The second chapter describes the Croatian education system and curriculum alterations, placing attention on vital changes: intercultural communication competence significance and digital proficiency of all participants in FL learning. The third chapter introduces the platform *eTwinning,* which combines all mentioned aspects and improves students' performance through international collaboration.

The practical segment of the paper introduces a project conducted using the aforementioned platform. The *Teddy Bear Project* was launched as an initiative to involve future teachers in the unavoidable process of increasing students' intercultural awareness. Both participant sides, Croatian and Dutch, equally meaningful for the outcome, gathered the required materials in order to provide a stimulus for children to learn more about the other country, thus fostering tolerance, understanding and acceptance of diverse cultures while practicing English speaking and writing skills. Major observations and conclusions gathered during the writing of the thesis are presented in the final part of the paper.

1. TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

The expansion of learning and teaching of the English language produced various changes when it comes to the preparational stages of becoming a teacher. This raised new questions and emphasized the importance of proper education for foreign language (hereinafter referred to as FL) teachers. Finding ways to achieve that professional stage of incorporating all crucial segments of teaching a language has been the main subject of many researchers and experts in the education field throughout the years (Hu, 2016; Singleton & Lengyel,1995; Singleton, 2001; Fillmore & Snow, 2018). A teacher's knowledge about every aspect of the language, including its culture, is what is emphasized to be crucial for students' overall learning experience.

The education system has had many different approaches throughout the years, especially when it comes to different theories and ideas of language learning. The most popular opinion was that its most important function is communication (Littlewood, 1981). The language itself became more interesting to researchers and teachers in the early years of the 20th century, offering multiple methods concerning the way teachers should use it in classrooms. From only using grammar, to just reading or simply speaking (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), assumptions and theories changed frequently.

1.1   Documents and research

Alongside numerous behavior studies that examined situations and important elements of exposure to a new language, there was a question of finding the right way to teach a foreign language, as well as selecting precise age to start the process of learning. One of many recognized researchers, an American linguist and professor, Lily Wong Fillmore (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2015) uncovered something extraordinary while observing young FL learners. According to the study, the interaction between native speakers of English and FL learners, and established strategies it produced, turned out to be crucial for their language proficiency recorded months later. Her analysis showed that, in their interactions, the children used three social strategies (1 – Join a group and act as if you understand what's going on, even if you don't; 2 – Give the impression, with a few well-chosen words, that you speak the language; 3 – Count on your friends for help) and five cognitive strategies (1 – Assume what people are saying is relevant to the situation at hand; 2 – Get some expressions you understand, and start talking ; 3 – Look for recurring parts

in the formulas you know; 4 – Make the most of what you've got; 5 – Work on the big things first, save the details for later). This clarifies children's aim when communicating – not trying to master the language but requesting their place in a social environment (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2015).

Students, although being the essence of the learning process, are not completely individual in this case. Their whole journey and results rely on the teacher as well. With a wide range of teaching problems - from classroom techniques to school organization (Broughton, Brumfit, Pincas, & Wilde, 1978) - they must be prepared for any situation, even outside the main educational purpose, in order to fulfil their tasks. During the two stages of introducing and teaching foreign languages in Europe, numerous methods were sequined merely to replace the previous one with something new and possibly better. Though many of them became less popular, the methods never completely disappeared from usage, they were usually combined with the current beliefs or in some way fabricated to fit new standards. For example, the Grammar-Translation Method has remained very suitable for autodidactic students who need a bilingual approach and who can cope with the terminology (Howatt & Smith, 2014).

Nowadays, after years of practice and searching for the right method to teach a foreign language, current language teaching professionals tend to have additional tasks; for example, improving the quality of teaching as well as focusing on possible concerns. The mentioned concerns center on (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 2):

- understanding learners and their roles, rights, needs, motivations, strategies, and the processes they employ in second language learning
- understanding the nature of language teaching and learning and the roles teachers, teaching methods, and teaching materials play in facilitating successful learning
- understanding how English functions in the lives of learners, the way the English language works, the particular difficulties it poses for second language learners, and how learners can best achieve their goals in learning English
- understanding how schools, classrooms, communities, and the language teaching profession can best support the teaching and learning of English.

Taking all the above-mentioned factors into account, each teacher still has 'room' to try and explore their own style and have an open mind to experience and flexibility when it comes to lesson planning, motivating students, and finding the right response to their students' needs.

1.2   Croatian schools and EFL

In the second half of the 20th century, Croatian studies started emerging due to the increase of evaluations concerning the right starting age for language learning. One of the most meaningful projects in Croatia, which provided future educators with plenty of diverse ideas and outcomes, was conducted by Mirjana Vilke. The aim of starting the work on this project was a vision of future native speakers of Croatian who could use one of the widespread languages of western civilization in their life and work (Vilke & Vrhovac, 1993).

Taking into consideration all the results from earlier experiments, Vilke started a new trend of finding the right age for introducing a foreign language to children (English, German, Italian, or French - depending on the school in question). However, there is more to this topic than meets the eye. Even after successfully finding the approximately suitable age of 6-7 years old, as many theoreticians believe it is the peak of intellectual abilities, the question of how to teach a language the right way remained. It seemed as if the key for successful results lied in dividing the attention into two interrelated directions (ibid.): the investigation of different aspects of children's performance (conducted by applied linguists and psychologists using the methods of research employed in the field – tests, questionnaires, and interviews) and the actual work of teachers in the classroom.

Although the project sample (including roughly 3000 participants) implied that generalization cannot be implemented, further examination proved that given means are indeed enough when it comes to this kind of research with a broad range of characteristics. Moreover, not only did the research disprove possible negative interference with remaining subjects, but it also indicated that learning a foreign language at that age widens their horizons when it comes to understanding language as a system. In addition to that revelation, other gathered information proved to be very meaningful regarding students themselves. Realizing that children at that age

are still mostly immature and that each one of them is a separate individual, Vilke concluded that this issue needs to be addressed as an important matter when it comes to FL learning and teaching. Implicating Ann Peters' suggestion on types of language learners (see Vilke & Vrhovac, 1993):

- those who use an analytic approach (starting with the parts and building up the whole)
- those who use a gestalt approach (from the whole to the various parts)
- those who use both an analytic and a gestalt approach,

the author explained that this observation should not be overlooked. Furthermore, teachers who deal with such young learners have an obligation to pay attention and detect common characteristics prior to their lesson planning, to successfully fulfil their students' needs. Aforesaid traits involve the emotional stage of a child, possible uncomfortable situations and/or feelings, a general sense of classroom community, lack of mature attention span, and evolving their overall skills through playful activities. With that being said, the importance of FL teachers and their education certainly becomes conspicuous.

1.3   Foreign language teachers

Vilke's project induced motivation in others to try and successfully introduce English as a foreign language to first graders which resulted in permanent changes from that moment forward, thus raising a question about teachers themselves. Correlation between secondary school teachers (with a university language degree and additional training for working with young children[1]) and the class teachers was the preliminary approach in the abovementioned project which required a solution for the future. According to Mirjana Vilke (2013), the most desirable outcome seemed to be primary teachers who are additionally qualified for teaching a foreign language which would be profitable in numerous aspects, such as (ibid., p. 27):

- There would be practically no technical problems regarding the timetable,
- Primary teachers are by definition educated in developmental psychology and other disciplines related to the growing and developing child,

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[1] Vilke, M. (2013). Introduction. In Mihaljević Djigunović J. (Ed.), *Children and English as a foreign language*. University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, FF press, p. 14

- They are well acquainted with each child in the class, his/her needs and problems,
- They can easily teach the parts of other school subjects through the medium of the foreign language if they are properly trained for the task.

As a result of this kind of thinking, nowadays, there is a program included in the Faculty of Teacher Education – education for future EFL teachers. Thanks to non-other than Mirjana Vilke, new primary school teachers can pass on their love for the English (or German) language to young learners. Although often considered recent and frequently unheard of, this integrated, five-year-long study has been providing the Croatian education system with unique teachers for almost 30 years. The 1992 accepted motion (Rosić, 2009) to prolong the teacher training program from two to four years was the primary step towards today's situation. Vilke understood only insistence and strong will can achieve what she believed in, thus tirelessly requesting separate faculty courses.

The present-day program differs significantly from the first one, primarily by the number of required weekly/yearly hours of English classes, as well as the five-year duration, not to mention the quality of the current syllabus, as well as the professors. Moreover, the initial hope was to produce FL teachers whose job would include first to fourth grade of primary school teaching, but now, in addition to general teaching competence, they also acquire skills for teaching English throughout primary school (Narančić Kovač, 2019). To acquire at least 300 compulsory ECTS credits, students are obliged not only to pass all the exams, but to fulfil their study program with numerous requirements (e.g., essays, seminars, presentations, teaching practice, practicums, etc.) along with writing their diploma thesis. The study program includes a pedagogical-psychological-didactic group of subjects, basic subjects of the profession, a methodical group of subjects and a group of subjects of English (or German) language studies (Integrirani preddiplomski i diplomski sveučilišni studij – Učiteljski studij s engleskim ili njemačkim jezikom, 2020).

2. CROATIAN CURRICULUM

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the aim of compulsory education was to master physical skills which are necessary and can contribute to the nation. It also instilled values of ethics and social communication abilities among teenagers. Nowadays, compulsory education is considered to be a right of every citizen in many countries. According to UNESCO's 'Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2010', about 135 countries have constitutional provisions for free and non-discriminatory education for all.[2]

The Republic of Croatia, alongside other listed countries, has compulsory primary education which is free of charge for children aged 6 to 15, as well as for children with developmental difficulties up to the age of 21. Lasting minimally 8 years, its purpose is to enable students to acquire knowledge in accordance with their abilities and preferences. During this time, the child strives to acquire general competence. This includes a dynamic combination of cognitive and metacognitive skills, knowledge and understanding, interpersonal, intellectual, and practical skills as well as ethical values (González & Wagenaar, 2008). All of this is extremely important for continuing education and lifelong learning in a changing socio-cultural context.

Characteristics and quality of the education system implemented in the listed countries vary depending on which political system the country has and how well developed the mentioned system is. Whether it is Mathematics, Croatian, English, or Art, teaching should be constructed professionally and in accordance with the curriculum in order to achieve the best possible results. The term curriculum refers to the lessons and academic content taught in a school or a specific course or program. In dictionaries, curriculum is often defined as the courses offered by a school (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021) but it is rarely used in such a general sense in schools. Depending on how broadly educators define or employ the term, curriculum typically refers to the knowledge and skills students are expected to learn, which includes the learning standards or learning objectives they are expected to meet; the units and lessons that teachers teach; the assignments and projects given to students; the books, materials, videos, presentations, and readings used in a

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[2] India joins the list of 135 countries in making education a right. Retrieved January 11, 2021 from: https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/India-joins-list-of-135-countries-in-making-education-a-right/article13666115.ece

course; and the tests, assessments, and other methods used to evaluate student learning (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2013).

When it comes to the quality of the education system in the Republic of Croatia, judging by the results of analysis of students' acquired knowledge, according to which it is below average compared to the average of many countries around the world, it may be concluded that there is much room for improvement. That is what the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education decided to do in early 2018. Phase 1 of the project (from March 2018 to March 2019) has made a significant contribution to key aspects of the Comprehensive Curriculum Reform in Croatia. They focused on four themes: (1) learning outcomes, (2) problem solving, (3) learning to learn, and (4) coaching[3].

2.1   New curriculum in Croatia

Schools all around the world have subjects that might differ in many categories from country to country, but all in all, each one has a list which organizes them for a particular level. This group of taught subjects is called curriculum. Dissatisfaction with Croatian education system, considered to be out-of-date by most people, encouraged the Ministry of Science and Education to try and introduce contemporary and much needed changes. The previous national document, which initiated the start of an experimental program called "Škola za život" in 48 primary and 26 secondary Croatian schools, could not simply be abandoned. Target groups included only several grades (1st, 5th, and 7th), thus generating both positive and negative reactions from parents and students. The aim of the experimental program is to check the applicability of new curricula and forms of working methods and new teaching aids with regard to the following objectives[4]:

- increasing students' competencies in problem solving;
- increasing student satisfaction at school and motivating their teachers.

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[3] Summary of Monitoring and Evaluation Findings. Retrieved November 2, 2020 from: https://skolazazivot.hr/sazetak-engleski/
[4] Eksperimentalne škole – Škola za život. Retrieved May 28, 2021 from: https://skolazazivot.hr/o-projektu/eksperimentalne-skole/
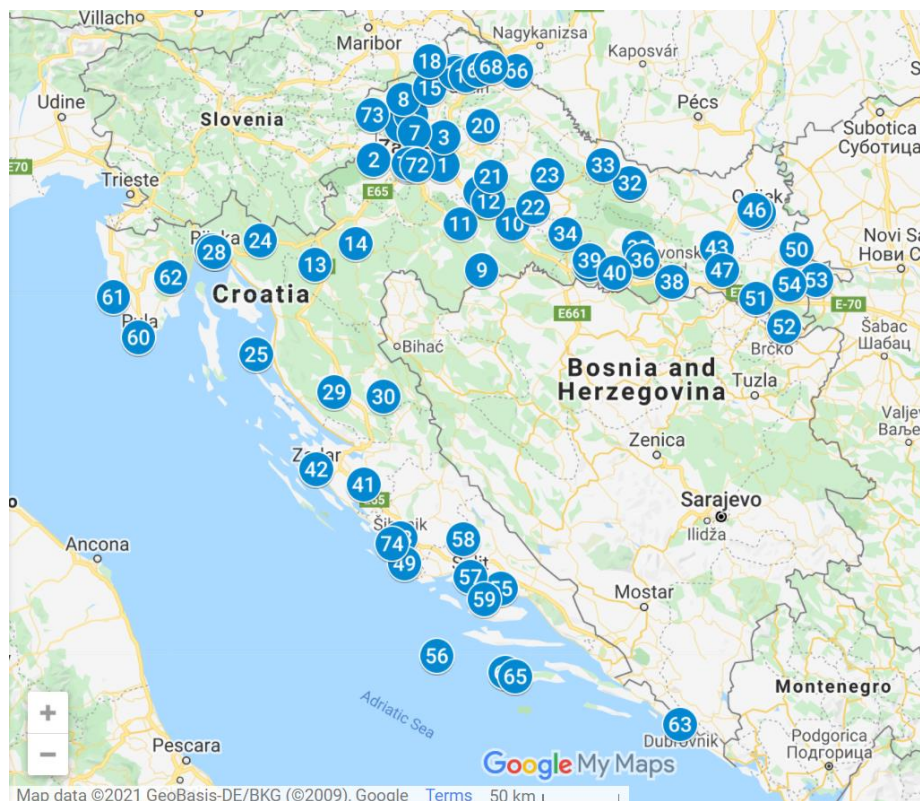
Image 1. Representation of participant schools in Croatia chosen for an experimental project "Škola za život". ("Eksperimentalne škole – Škola za život," 2019)

2.2 English as a Foreign Language in the Croatian Curriculum

The new curriculum for the English language is based on the latest approaches when it comes to learning and teaching foreign languages. It provides teachers with various innovations while respecting and upgrading quality ideas from previous documents concerning the education system. This is the first document in the Croatian education system which includes both primary and secondary school, or in other words, the first document regarding the so-called educational cycles.

The new curriculum offers fundamental changes by shifting from previous ones, which means it has to be approached differently. This shift is primarily conceptual, which specifically means that the content of learning has been replaced and organized within three domains, along

with establishing the main principle by transferring emphasis on educational outcomes while considering students as the essential character of the learning process. To be more precise, the English language curriculum incorporates Communication language competence, Intercultural communication competence and Independence in language acquisition as key domains.[5] The curriculum states that they are the starting point of educational outcomes that clearly state what students know, what they can do and what attitudes they develop in a particular year of study, and are defined in accordance with the student's developmental characteristics thus ensuring continuity in progress and balanced transition from class to class and from cycle to cycle.
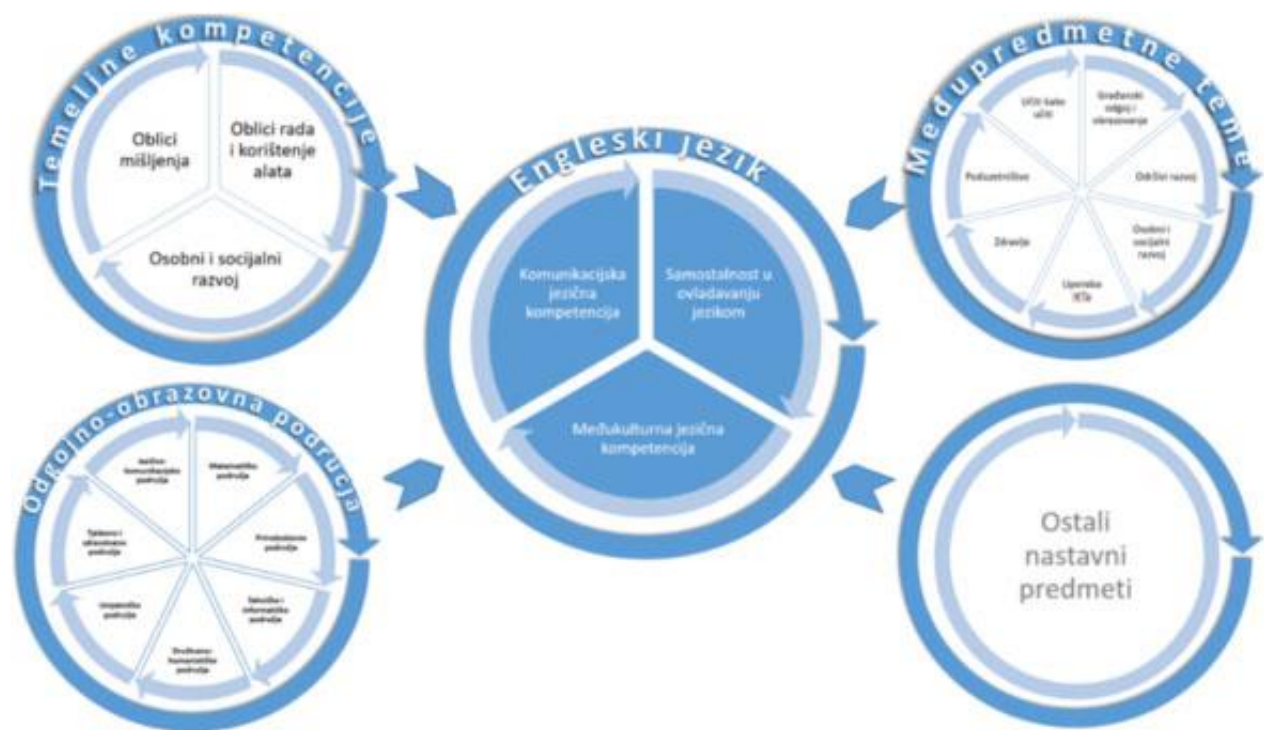

Image 2. Graphic presentation of the curriculum organization of the English language subject in all years of study. ("Odluka o donošenju kurikuluma za nastavni predmet Engleski jezik za osnovne škole i gimnazije u Republici Hrvatskoj," 2019)

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[5] *Odluka o donošenju kurikuluma za nastavni predmet Engleski jezik za osnovne škole i gimnazije u Republici Hrvatskoj.* (2019). Retrieved January 14, 2021, from Narodne-novine.nn.hr.

The first step to full coverage of domains is understanding each element apropos of communication competence and that the lack of any part can lead to a collapse of language learning foundation. The infrastructure of FL learning is awakening the ability to understand, as well as express information, ideas, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and values in accordance with different cultural and social contexts, both orally and in writing. What makes it a whole, according to the new curriculum, is acquiring knowledge of the language in a way that emphasizes all elements (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and spelling; styles and registers of spoken and written English; features of verbal and nonverbal interaction) alongside its usage in the act of communication (activities of listening to and understanding spoken messages; activities of speaking; activities of reading, understanding and writing texts; activities of mediation). Combining those fundamental components with cultural interpretation and acceptance, the development of critical thinking and media literacy progress assembles what is the essence of the English language program in our schools.

The document itself is the base that indicates safe and stimulating learning conditions, however, each teacher can interpret and implement the new curriculum in their own way, ensuring its quality through their autonomy and creativity. The organization of the classes, thus, reflects teacher's freedom of choice when it comes to teaching content, methods, and aids.

2.3   Intercultural communication competence

As one of the most important segments of learning a foreign language and one of the three domains in the English language curriculum, the concept of intercultural communication competence might be the most interesting when it comes to language acquisition for both learners and teachers. In a globalized world, there is no escape from learning about other cultures, even unintentionally (for example when watching the news). Educators found that incorporating this element into teaching a foreign language provides students with the development of self-awareness as an individual and a social being interested in cultural differences and learning about them (Ali, Kazemian, & Hussain Mahar, 2015). This means that FL teaching has an equally important assignment as other subjects, and that is to provide and install proper language insight and experience along with preparation for authentic encounters with diverse cultures.

Although numerous educators promote theoretical native-like competence in the target language (Pawley & Syder, 2014), it may seem flawed because English (as well as every other language) contains plenty of different dialects, instantly canceling one impeccable speaker model. This brings up a question of unrealistic regulations and expectations of speakers when it comes to English as a lingua franca: "Should there be a non-native language example presented alongside the native speaker in FL teaching/learning?". According to Alptekin (2002), a few innovative adjustments could be essential to lead new learners towards excelling achievements when it comes to behaving appropriately in both known and unexpected situations. He states the following changes:

- Bilinguals as models in English as an International Language
- Presenting linguistic and cultural behavior, promoting awareness of difference as well as coping with it
- Preparation of students to be both global and local speakers of English, along with familiarizing them with international and national cultures
- Familiar and relevant contexts for students
- Materials with native-nonnative and nonnative-nonnative interactions.

To be able to use the term *intercultural*, it must be associated with the engagement of two or more cultures. Considering that, the recognized definition of intercultural competence explains it as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deadroff, 2006, p. 247). What is important to mention is that to fully comprehend the complexity of the term itself, one must be mature enough to be able to recognize and value all its segments: cognitive, affective, and pragmatic. That is why professionals emphasize an early start when it comes to learning a foreign language so that students' minds are open to cherish and respect every culture they run into throughout their lives. Accordingly, teachers are the main starting point for providing appropriate viewpoints, knowledge, and skills. As stated by Breka & Petravić (2015), so-called FL&IC[6] teachers should:

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[6] Foreign language and intercultural competence teacher

- Acquire culture-general knowledge, the knowledge of the target and the learner culture, and recognize approaches of developing learner IC (cognitive aspect)

- Willingly expand their own IC beliefs and, subsequently, endorse IC integration into FL learning (affective aspect)

- Manage to critically address their own IC, together with the ability to encourage learner's IC development through proper methods and activities (pragmatic aspect).

Due to this kind of cultural awakening concerning Croatian EFL teachers, many projects initiated the exploration of this recently significant FL segment, later confirming the positive attitude towards IC from both teachers and students, as well as parents. However, the results also indicated not all teachers know the true importance of IC and how to incorporate it into daily lessons, not to mention the fact that it is considered a less important teaching objective (ibid.).

Another important project concluded the immense impact and usefulness of the European Language Portfolio (self-reflecting document for language learning observation) in Croatian primary schools. Although there was a modest number of FL teachers involved, parents and students provided a solid number of participants for adequate results. As stated by Andraka (2012), the Project "Developing Pupils' Independence by Means of the European Language Portfolio" resulted in reassuring findings when it comes to advocating intercultural recognition and displaying the relevance of integrating linguistic and intercultural aspects of language learning. Furthermore, the European Language Portfolio was found to have an effective outcome regarding students' enthusiasm toward tracking progress, together with improvement perception. Considering all, teachers are those who put the final point whether they acknowledge the importance of IC in their classes or neglect it, and how much effort they put in developing their and students' intercultural awareness.

2.4   Digital competence of students and teachers

Today's society is marked by the rapid development of information technology, which has resulted in a great dependence of society on the competence and knowledge in the field of IT. The

time in which modern society currently finds itself, and the obligations in which its members participate daily, require them to act flexibly, skillfully, and efficiently, and it is the use of this technology that greatly helps to achieve goals in this way. Information technology (IT) is defined as the use of any computers, storage, networking and other physical devices, infrastructure, and processes to create, process, store, secure and exchange all forms of electronic data.[7] IT is directly related to the concept of ICT, which further refines the previous term in such a way that it includes all the technical means used for the purpose of accessing and handling information. ICT describes any information or communication-related technology which includes the Internet, wireless networks, cell phones, and other communication mediums.[8]

The ICT has implemented its way into our everyday life, not only when it comes to the workplace or school, but also in the comfort of our home. Whether it is a computer, TV, cell phone, or smart device, they all make up a part of our daily lives. Given that each new generation is visibly more and more affected by almost constant correlation with ICT, the question of the uncertain future boundaries arises, especially when it comes to students and young learners. The impact of ICT generally, along with the impact of its tools is significant in present education systems and the overall way of teaching. This assumption was certainly confirmed by last year's global pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus. Even before the pandemic, schools realized the importance of enforcing and using ICT. However, it seems as if the information and communication technology is equally represented, if not more, in FL teaching versus in other subjects. When it comes to their work, teachers use traditional and proven methods adapted into digital form (Hanžić Deda, 2019). What we see daily is the usage of presentations through PPT, interactive smart boards, and record-keeping tablets.

When it comes to students' interaction, teachers often require computer-written essays and PowerPoint presentations followed by sending them via e-mail. Also, it is worth emphasizing the application of accompanying content on some of the multimedia materials that come with textbooks that most often contain audio and video materials, interactive tasks for checking knowledge of grammar and spelling (ibid., p. 474). Furthermore, teachers can include unavoidable sites such as YouTube and Vimeo as sites of endless sources of video material, together with

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[7] IT definition. Retrieved April 6, 2021, from: https://searchdatacenter.techtarget.com/definition/IT
[8] ICT definition. Retrieved April 6, 2021, from: https://techterms.com/definition/ict

specialized websites offering an impressive amount of helpful teaching material (quizzes, interactive games for practicing content of a FL – e.g. grammar, vocabulary, expressions and word order in a sentence).

Image 3. An example of the screen layout while solving online tasks on one of the publisher's web pages. (Placement and Practice Tests, RELOD, 2013)

Numerous studies regarding the effect and use of ICT in education show a positive impact on communication skills, together with increasing children's engagement in teaching and responsible, independent learning. Furthermore, Kralj (2008) states that numerous scientists concluded the fact that better educational accomplishments are achieved in schools with better ICT equipment, and that as many as 86% of European teachers believe that students are more motivated and thus more attentive in class if they use computers and the Internet. Having said that, it is extremely important to use ICT the right way for the purpose of pedagogical and methodological

scheme regarding lesson materials in order to educate new generations of students for the ITC-based future. Just like any other technology, ICT comes with certain limitations as well. While most educational specialists empathize putting aside the few disadvantages, few still argue otherwise and essay the drawbacks of using technology in education.[9] Examples of the advantages and disadvantages are given in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of implementation ICT in educational system

Advantages	Disadvantages
o Enhanced the modes of communication o Cost-efficient o Eco-friendly (Paperless) o Better teaching and learning methods o Minimize cost and save time o Easy student management o Automatic solutions to manual paper-based process and procedures o Interactive and collaborative teaching and learning methods o Spread awareness of the social impact of technological change in education o Enhance E-learning and learning management system (LMS) o Independent learning platforms for students o Teachers can teach better with images, videos and graphics while delivering lessons o Educators can create engaging, interesting and well-designed classroom activities o Improve the administration and enhance the quality and efficiency of education	o Misleading and misguiding information o Risk of cyber-attacks and hacks o A risk to the traditional book and handwriting methods o Difficulty of managing courses online is difficult o Misuse of technology o Not accessible everywhere o Experience is required to handle ICT o Expense of buying computers and implementation of the internet

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[9] https://www.edusys.co/blog/what-is-ict-in-education

Presumably, the most important advantages could be the easier preparation and maintenance of lessons, the possibility of establishing contact with students despite physical distance, increasing student motivation to learn, not to mention the development of literacy. In addition to supporting the acquisition of basic skills, ICT also serves for lifelong learning and the acquisition of complex skills. Moreover, the Internet has unlimited potential and has become a motivation for pupils to satisfy their natural curiosity and desire for knowledge. However, like most things in life, technology also brings challenges to the teacher regarding the education needs, time investment and teaching management reorganization (Seljan, 2019).

Hanžić Deda (2019) mentions that, in order to fully realize all the advantages that ICT offers and to successfully follow the development of modern technology for teachers themselves, as well as the pace of their students, systematic investments are indeed needed to raise the level of their digital literacy. For that reason, it is in everyone's interest to provide children with teachers who are able to use ICT in approachable ways for students, which will unquestionably lead to higher-order thinking skills and produce innovative opportunities for them to embrace dealing with ongoing technological change in society and the future workplace.

3. eTWINNING

eTwinning is the community for schools in Europe, co-funded by the Erasmus+, the European programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport. It is a platform that now consists of many additional properties from its initial 2005 purpose, adding numerous international partnerships as well as different types of engagements, not just for teachers and students, but for countless active participants of the educational system.

One of many elements that identify this site is incorporating culture development into everyday school for anyone who is eager to learn more. Each participant contributes in their own way, collaborating with different people around Europe and actively acquiring new experiences while helping others do the same. The present community involves a staggering number of nearly 1 million teacher members, more than 200 000 participant schools, with countless active projects.
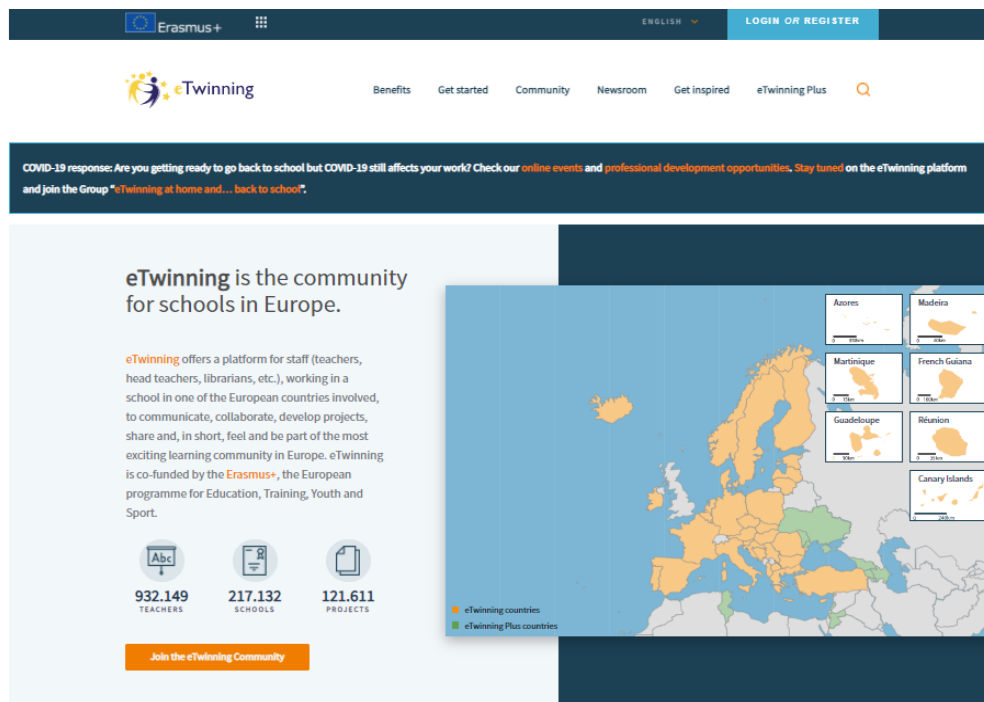

Image 4. Homepage of eTwinning platform ("eTwinning - Homepage," 2021)

3.1   Aims and purpose

The eTwinning platform allows participants to interact daily, whether it involves new and fun activities, international projects, mutual content sharing, not to mention various teacher training and/or conferences. The problem of inadequate acquisition of intercultural competence in FL learning inspired this movement to portray an efficient way of connecting people while awakening their IC sensitivity (affective process), awareness (cognitive process), and adroitness (behavioral process) (Alcaraz-Mármol, 2020). As a consequence, this type of interaction leads to numerous possible outcomes such as providing an innovative learning environment and pedagogical practices, supporting experimental and experience-based learning, promoting and improving motivation and learner involvement(Kampylis, Bocconi, & Punie, 2012). . Not only does it provide teachers with further development in their careers, but it also offers free models of various lesson plans and strategies for classroom usage and peer-learning, even with extracurricular activities and among older students.

Being considered a new and still mostly uninvestigated platform, determination to resolve its purpose and usefulness arises. Therefore, an important outcome was drawn from a Spanish study regarding the usage of eTwinning as an ICT tool in a learning environment (Alcaraz Mármol, 2020). By dividing 6th grade students into two groups (experimental and control group[10]), the study examined the possible positive influence of combining technology (eTwinning) with intercultural relations (collaboration group from Poland). Through different types of activities, such as informative videos, Q&As, open discussions and group assignments, students shared their knowledge and opinion while constantly interacting with foreign peers, thus unintentionally allowing IC into their sessions. The researchers gathered the information necessary for a final conclusion: eTwinning serves as a competence developing tool which is an example of how to integrate ICT in the FL classroom, going further the language itself, focusing on the ICC, which is a relevant aspect that sometimes takes a second place (Alcaraz Mármol, 2020).

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[10] The experimental group worked within what is called eTwinning learning (with foreign students), whereas the control group followed the usual communicative teaching methodology, without the use of eTwinning (see Alcaraz-Mármol, 2020, p. 158).

3.2 Countries

The platform mainly consists of European countries; however, it welcomed few additional members thanks to its immense impact on the education-related community. Alongside EU members and non-members, eTwinning expanded through 8 new collaborations: Tunisia, Lebanon, Jordan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine and Republic of Moldova, thereby forming an additional section of the platform – eTwinning Plus. All members are equally able to participate in projects and activities, regardless of their status. Moreover, eTwinning National Support Service of each country offers a special website that contributes to an easier and straightforward approach for new participants. Not only does it provide additional help and information, but it introduces beginners to more than 1500 ambassadors – experienced members eager to share their knowledge and skills, assist, and help develop the platform.

As for Croatia, more than 17 000 teachers and 2700 schools contributed to the current astonishing number of 7915 projects. Roughly divided, Croatian "eTwinning units" consist of 3 main regions: eastern, central and western.
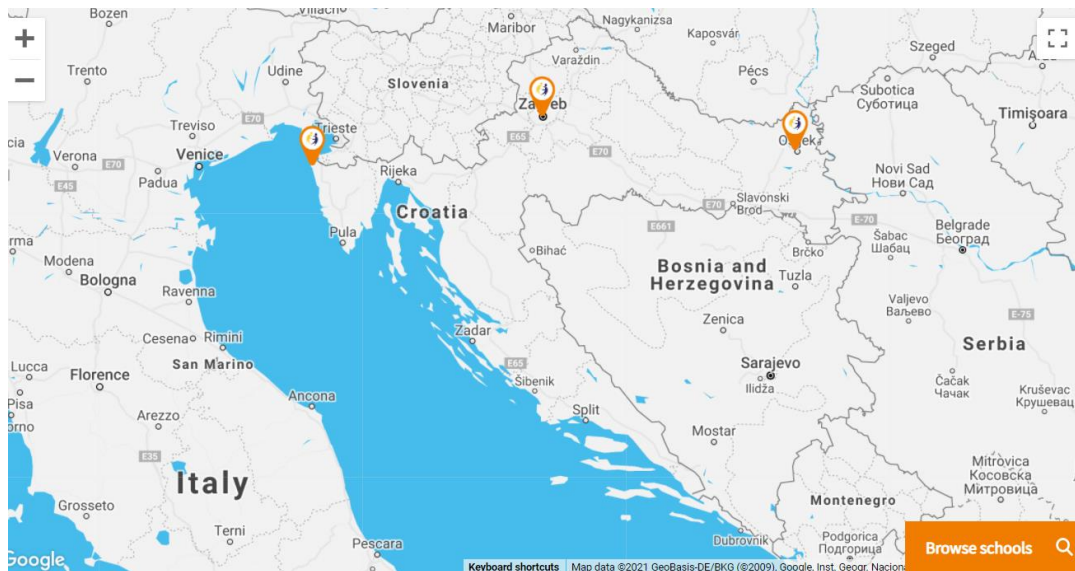

Image 5. Map of Croatian "eTwinning regions"(Country, 2021).

3.3   Projects

Enthusiastic and creative teachers are the core of the platform's success, thanks to their never-ending desire to motivate their students through innovative learning. Besides composing their own ideas into projects, eTwinning members are offered prefabricated models which can be used as reference points and inspiration for the like-minded. Regardless of the number of participants and partners, duration or subject, it is recommended to regard certain elements (Kits, 2021):

- Introduction of partners
- Orientation
- Communication
- Collaboration
- Evaluation & Assessment
- Follow-up.

In addition to the aforementioned characteristics, one of the features of the projects is its formal or informal sense, which largely depends on its purpose and manner of implementation. When it comes to informal types, it should be emphasized that they rely heavily on extracurricular activity, which is a very common characteristic in many projects. Furthermore, when it comes to specific features of projects, they can be explored by keywords, names, places, not to mention broaden aspects such as subjects, languages, registration dates, age range and/or platform additions.

Image 6. Example of an extended project search on the eTwinning platform. (eTwinning Live, 2020)

3.4   eTwinning additions

The platform offers more than solely entertaining and diverse activities for students. In addition to presented project ideas and kits, teachers have the opportunity to thrive in their own professional development through free designs and materials for their classroom, as well as being a part of a larger community and attending numerous conferences, seminars and free learning events. Furthermore, eTwinning caters to annual, three-day conferences, which celebrate the platform's achievements for that year. Whether you are an active member or non-eTwinner who only now discovered its benefits, the platform awards all of its participants with a well-earned certificate. Through countless advice-packed presentations and educational activities, teachers all over Europe have the opportunity for quality progress.

Image 7. Example of a project activity for conference participants - eTwinning for Future Teachers Online Conference 2020 (eTwinning Live, 2020).

Moreover, exceptional work does not go unnoticed. Outstanding projects are granted multiple benefits, from possible application for a National Quality Label, and/or receiving European Quality Label, to earning an honorable eTwinning Prize. However, not only people can profit from this platform. Schools that representatively acknowledge eTwinning in their local community, and advocate its pedagogy and beliefs, get the status of an eTwinning school.

Besides all prizes and recognitions, the platform includes eTwinning Live for searching, connecting and creating, eTwinning Live app for staying current through instant notifications, and TwinSpace for safe project participation.

4. THE TEDDY BEAR PROJECT

One of the most common ways of engaging students with different cultures is through a game or role play in which they have a significant contribution to make them feel more involved with the process of learning. The Teddy Bear Project is based on that exact way of thinking. This is a type of project which includes every student from a particular class and allows them to enrich others with information and examples they gathered on their own. The aim is to provide the stimulus for children to learn more about the other country and its culture, while unconsciously raising awareness and acquiring intercultural competence. It fosters tolerance, understanding, and acceptance of diverse cultures. It also allows the students to get to know each other and, at the same time, being exposed to the English language outside the main lessons. And foremost, the students have the chance to practice their communication skills.

4.1. Idea and arrangements

The idea of the aforesaid project developed thanks to professor Milković and assistant teacher Hanžić Deda, moderators of an elective course *eTwinning i nastava.* The main assignment for students was to research and review the eTwinning platform, create a profile and contact students from around Europe that have similar or same courses. The next step was to find a partner and organize a potential project, create and describe its aims, work process and expected results.

Jorelijn Aalvanger, a student at the PABO in Zwolle, presented the Netherlands and her class, while Croatia was presented by me, a student teacher Lucija Kordić and 3rd grade students from Tin Ujević Elementary school. The selected project, called *The Teddy Bear Project*, included two teddy bear toys that were presented to young learners as culturally diverse cousins, revealing their habits and routines. Students could thus observe and appreciate both Dutch and Croatian culture.

Apart from cultural, the planned aspects of student engagement comprised linguistic and non-linguistic elements. Some of these aspects are listed in the table below.

Table 2. Project competence elements

Cultural	Linguistic	Non-linguistic
• Heritage • Habits • Routines • Extracurricular activities • Town sights • Typical expressions known to native speakers	• Writing a short descriptive text • Word order • Vocabulary • Grammar • Listening to other students' exapmles	• Decision-making (What to show?) • Independence • Creativity • Social interactions, risk-taking (going places, exposing personal ideas and opinions to public viewing)

4.2. Process

Student teachers presented the project in their project classrooms accompanied by their main teachers. Aims and outcomes were given, as well as the rules the students had to follow - when given the teddy bear, a student takes it home and documents the needed materials. By taking pictures and writing a short text about one cultural place in their hometown (and/or their favorite place in their neighborhood, their hobbies, family customs, etc.) students provide examples of cultural differences and awareness for other participants. Each student has two weekdays with the teddy, after which they have to return it to school, alongside photos and written data. Following the alphabetical order, the teacher would assign the bear to the next student. Depending on the number of students, the project lasted until everyone has participated with their unique contribution.

4.3. Product

Croatian students had had approximately a month and a half of time before the Covid 19 pandemic hit and the lockdown started, thus not having enough time to finish the project. Not only did the pandemic forcibly stop this project, but there were multiple obstacles that interfered with it, making the teddy bear unavailable for other students to take home. Altogether, only seven Croatian students got their chance to take part in the project. However, all of the successful participants have proven themselves as very engaged and impressed by the project, verifying its value and simplicity. The images below illustrate the selection of outstanding example materials collected during the implementation of the project.

Jorelijn Aalvanger

17.01 – 20.01 Benjamin and Bob

I introduced Bob the dike. There are several dikes in the Netherlands. A dike separates the water from the land. They have been constructed to protect the country from flooding. Without dikes, the Netherlands runs under water because the land is lower than the sea.

Lucija Kordić

22.1. – 24.1. Korina and Ben

We went to my ballet lesson in Gornji Grad in Zagreb. I made a split and we took a picture.

When we came home, we made muffins. The next day, we made muffins again and Ben thought they were great! He became friends with my Teddy, „Big".

I took a piece of cloth and made pants for Ben so he wasn't cold (it's very cold in Zagreb these days, around zero).

We had fun today and then I gave Ben to Sandro.

(the first three pictures are in my school and with my school friend Doris)

The man in the picture above was Tin Ujević, a Croatian poet considered by many to be the greatest poet in 20th-century Croatian literature. Our school is named after him.

Jorelijn Aalvanger

28.01 – 23.01 Annemijn and Bob

I played a game with my mom and Bob. The game is called 'Kolonisten van Catan (Settlers of Catan)'. Unfortunately my mother won. In the meantime Bob has already received a present from me. I gave him socks so he doesn't have cold feet anymore.

The Cibona Tower in a high-rise building located in the center of Zagreb, Croatia on Dražen Petrović Square 3, 2 minutes from our school. It is 92 meters (307 feet) tall, and it has 25 levels above ground.

Also- Ben has a cap that I made for him.

Ben and me in tunnel Grič. It is a pedestrian tunnel located in the city centre of Zagreb, Croatia, under the historic neighbourhood of Grič (also called Gradec or Gornji Grad), which gave the tunnel its name. The tunnel consists of a central hall, which is connected by two passageways to Mesnička Street in the west and Stjepan Radić Street in the east, and four passageways extending to the south.

Ben and I in front of The Lotrščak Tower. The Lotrščak Tower (Croatian: Kula Lotršćak) is a fortified tower located in Zagreb, Croatia, in an old part of town called Gradec or Gornji grad (Upper Town). The tower, which dates to the 13th century, was built to guard the southern gate of the Gradec town wall. The name is derived from Latin campana latrunculorum, meaning "thieves' bell", referring to a bell hung in the tower in 1646 to signal the closing of the town gates.

Image 8. A selection of materials collected through the project (Twinspace, 2018).

However, shortly before closing schools, the class took a short trip with their teacher, visiting all the main attractions Zagreb's old town can offer. As a result, the project gained more helpful information and product than anticipated. Contributing various example photographs, students showed essential tourist spots accompanied by useful descriptions. Considering students' age and competence level, the teacher's involvement was necessary for providing coherent and logical content. She helped transcribe their experience into text using students' observations while engaging them in brief discussions.

A similar problem did not bypass the Dutch classroom. The pandemic hit their schools as well, limiting their material to merely 12 photos, i.e., students in total. While the Dutch side had the advantage of more students involved, their side of the results was rather insufficient when compared to the Croatian team. As a consequence, the final results and subsequent questionnaires were, unfortunately, not carried out.

Although the closing outcome remains absent, the project showed its educational and personal benefits. Through collaborative and multidisciplinary learning, students developed some of the key competences (Gilleran & Kearney, 2014): i.e., communication in the mother tongue, communication in a foreign language, digital competence, social competences, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, as well as cultural awareness and expression. Not only did students practice storytelling in their mother tongue, but they also vastly contributed to the written part of the project in English, thus enriching their existing vocabulary. Moreover, their awareness of both Dutch and their own cultural heritage was enhanced significantly. It is certain that if the students had the opportunity to complete the aforementioned project, they would have had fulfilled the outcomes determined by the Croatian curriculum for the subject English, such as [11]

- ability to notice, interpret and compare similarities and differences between cultures,
- empathy and open-mindedness towards understanding, acceptance and appreciation of diverse English speakers and their cultures,
- ability to state what they learned about others and themselves from intercultural experience,
- ability to respond to examples of positive ways of treating members of other cultures in a familiar context.

4.4. When teddy bear has to stay home

Projects, especially ones that include online activities, are extremely fun and have a lot of educational benefits for students of all ages and abilities. This has proven to be true before, but even more during the second half of the academic year 2019/2020 when the world was hit by a pandemic of the Covid-19 virus. When schools closed their doors in March 2020, a lot of questions

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[11] Odluka o donošenju kurikuluma za nastavni predmet Engleski jezik za osnovne škole i gimnazije u Republici Hrvatskoj. (2019). https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2019_01_7_139.html

concerning education were beginning to rise: "How long will lockdown last? How are students going to attend classes? Is online school enough?" etc. The Ministry of Science and Education set their rules and plans, but what about extracurricular activities and projects? Many of them were canceled or forgotten about. Those which were easy and possible to do from home continued without a problem, but our Teddy Bear Project, unfortunately, had to be dismissed.

Firstly, schools were closed, so the students were not able to exchange teddy bears and write their summaries. Secondly, Zagreb was hit by a destructive earthquake which incapacitated movement through the center of the capital, which was very important due to the aim of the project - showing cultural landmarks of students' hometown. Moreover, the question of hygiene and epidemiological measures when it comes to sharing and handover of the teddy bear was raised. The Dutch colleague ended the project on her part, giving no other option but to cancel the project altogether.

Not all projects ended due to this pandemic - similar projects using teddy bears were started but with all caution and social distance. The basic idea is to place a teddy bear (or another toy) in your window with the hope that a child walking or driving by will see it. It is based on a popular children's book and song where kids go on a "bear hunt" and they "are not afraid"[12]. This showed us that, though the project crosses cultural and language boundaries, the images themselves are universal; for the most part you can only identify the country or location from a written caption. Although this project might have lacked many educational or language aspects, it was a way for children around the world to stay connected.

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[12] *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* is a 1989 picturebook written by Michael Rosen and illustrated by Helen Oxenbury.

'We are not afraid' The teddy bear project of COVID-19

By Idaho Family Magazine | June 3, 2020 | 0 💬

By Photographer Bren Slade

Image 9. An online article about an alternative project (Idaho Family Magazine, 2020)

4.5. Advantages and disadvantages of an eTwinning project

Students in primary education, specifically in this day and age, tend to appreciate game-like activities and projects, as well as using online learning, which makes the eTwinning platform extremely useful and stimulating for young learners. The ability to connect with students all over Europe while learning about another country, culture or language provokes children's curiosity, which enables them to learn effortlessly. Countless studies have shown that interaction between students with culturally diverse backgrounds increases their intercultural competence and awareness, as well as sensitivity towards differences, thus enabling complete acquisition of a foreign language. Exposure to diverse non-native speakers, along with unconscious vocabulary growth, enhances learners' knowledge. In addition to student-centered improvement, the professional development of teachers is worth mentioning. Not only are they able to introduce

their schools to the platform and benefit from it, but they have opportunities for academic growth through conducting successful projects.

On the other hand, this kind of contemporary schooling may cause difficulties among a certain percentage of older generations of teachers in Croatian schools, who are not only apprehensive towards technology usage in classrooms, but in general, find it challenging to master. However, many of them do their best to disprove this generalization and invest their spare time in modernizing their lessons. Moreover, most schools find it hard to enter this type of project learning due to the lack of financial support when it comes to updating the school IT department. Not to mention schools in sparsely populated places that often do not have Internet access at all.

Finally, like any other inevitable change, both in life and in education, it may seem as if there is an equal number of positive and negative aspects. However, the benefits outweighed the drawbacks in the case of eTwinning. Being a part of eTwinning community might lead to prejudice towards ICT usage in classrooms at first, yet its countless advantages when it comes to students' development, as well as teachers' professional growth, instantly overshadow potential obstacles.

5. CONCLUSION

No matter when or how children start learning a foreign language, they all have a common fondness towards entertaining ways of learning. Although following certain rules that the National Curriculum provides is crucial, teachers are more than welcome to introduce a new style of teaching into their classrooms. Nowadays, there are endless ideas and possibilities for improving teaching approaches as a result of global connection and cultural awareness.

eTwinning platform is a phenomenal alternative for classroom and school innovations for numerous participants. Not only does it provide entertaining projects and lesson schemes, but it offers personal and professional achievements for every member. Having numerous EU countries involved, this platform extends international cooperation possibilities, thus promoting the development of digital competence and interculturality among students. Taking into consideration current advanced technology usage among youth, as well as their need for diversity in the classroom, eTwinning projects provide both enjoyable and stimulating outcomes for young learners.

As one of the founders and implementers of the Teddy Bear Project, I realized that students show great interest in digital aids inclusion in teaching activities, as well as the pleasure of independent data collecting and presentation of assigned materials. Furthermore, positive feedback from students regarding different experiences and lives of Dutch colleagues, contributed to the increasing awareness about their own culture and acknowledging whilst respecting other students' culture. Based on the above-mentioned information, I believe that the use of the eTwinning platform offers plenty of benefits for both the students who appreciate diversity when learning and the teachers who want to innovate the outdated ways of teaching.

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Izjava o izvornosti završnog/diplomskog rada

Izjavljujem da je moj diplomski rad izvorni rezultat mojeg rada te da se u izradi istoga nisam koristila drugim izvorima osim onih koji su u njemu navedeni.

_____

(vlastoručni potpis studenta)