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# European educational programme as a form of cultural and professional cognition

Projekt edukacyjny Unii Europejskiej formą poznania kulturowo-zawodowego

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## Abstract

The processes of globalisation and the development of a common, united Europe entail the migration of people to various parts of our continent. Nowadays migration is mostly related to the search for employment by people at various stages of their lives. The contact with a different cultural and professional reality might be surprising and often arouses feelings which are far from positive.

In the context of these processes intercultural competence, now called a key competence, a prerequisite for functioning in the post-modern, multicultural world, is assigned a particular significance. Equally central is, however, becoming familiar with the conditions of a country's professional culture. Only then can we talk about effective functioning on the European job market.

Numerous young people at the stage of high school education declare the will to build their future abroad. Therefore, it is necessary to search for tools which would render it possible for trainees to enter into professional life and cultural reality of a foreign country. One of such tools are the Leonardo da Vinci mobility programmes, which help students grow to know chosen professional fields while simultaneously "immersing themselves" in the deepest cultural strata of a given country.

The essence of the above subject matter shall be discussed on the example of a mobility programme carried out in Germany, in the Construction Training Centre.

Key words: interculturality, intercultural learning, intercultural competence, vocational training, youth exchange.

## Abstrakt

Procesy globalizacyjne oraz budowa wspólnej, zjednoczonej Europy warunkują przemieszczanie się ludności w różne miejsca naszego kontynentu. W dzisiejszych czasach ruchy migracyjne związane są najczęściej z poszukiwaniem zatrudnienia przez osoby znajdujące się na różnych etapach swojego życia. Zetknięcie z odmienną rzeczywistością kulturowo-zawodową bywa zaskakujące i budzi niejednokrotnie niepozytywne emocje.

W kontekście powyższych procesów przypisuje się szczególne znaczenie kompetencji interkulturowej określanej obecnie mianem kompetencji kluczowej, niezbędnej do funkcjonowania w postnowoczesnym, wielokulturowym świecie. Równie istotne jest jednak poznanie uwarunkowań zawodowej kultury narodowej. Dopiero wówczas można mówić o efektywnym funkcjonowaniu na europejskim rynku pracy.

Wielu młodych ludzi będących na etapie kształcenia ponadgimnazjalnego deklaruje chęć budowania swojej przyszłości poza granicami kraju. Dlatego należy poszukiwać narzędzi, które umożliwią adeptom nauki zawodu wejście w obszary życia zawodowego oraz innej rzeczywistości kulturowej. Jednym z takich instrumentów są projekty mobilności programu Leonardo da Vinci, pozwalające na poznanie wybranych obszarów zawodowych przy równoczesnym „zanurzeniu” się w najgłębsze warstwy kulturowe kraju natywnego użytkownika języka.

Istotę powyższej tematyki omówi Autorka na przykładzie jednego z projektów mobilności, realizowanego w Niemczech, w Centrum Kształcenia Budowlanego.

Słowa kluczowe: interkulturowość, interkulturowe uczenie się, kompetencja interkulturowa, kształcenie zawodowe, wymiany uczniowskie.

## Introduction

A fundamental change occurred in foreign language teaching in the 1970s. The scholars acknowledged that conforming to strict conventions and guidelines did not help achieve the expected goals (Kukowicz-Żarska, 2010: 24). It was shown that the first step on the road to success in learning a foreign language was communication. Therefore, researchers and teachers began seeking amongst the available didactic means and methods for a way to establish contact between the sender of the information and its receiver. The next necessary step was becoming acquainted with the cultural and social rules observed by the native speakers of the foreign language. It is namely not sufficient to know lexical expressions and grammatical rules by heart. The major element in language learning is finding a way to connect the two worlds: that of the foreign language and the learner's mother tongue. Effective communication is possible only if accompanied by penetration into the foreign culture (Krumm, 2003: 414). This is how foreign language teaching admitted the concept of interculturality, later taken up by numerous researchers, academic teachers, experts in foreign language teaching or linguists, e.g. Komorowska (1993), Thomas (1996), Krumm (2003), Grau (2004) and Paige (1993). This concept, however, has a much longer tradition, dating back to the period before World War I, when the research on interculturality was termed 'cultural studies' (Zawadzka, 2000: 451).

The aspect of communication seems to be the greatest and most complex problem for those living in a foreign country. Yet the cultural barriers based on stereotypes, differences in mentality and numerous traps of non-verbal communication are similarly consequential. What we ought to discuss at this juncture is the need for intercultural competence, also referred to as the fifth linguistic competence, which due to its dynamic, cognitive character may not be treated as a mere product, but rather as a process related to the acquisition of skills necessary to function in the complex world (Gruber 2000: 39).

The author of this article noticed the practical aspects of this problem when teaching German in the Complex of Construction Schools in Radom and at the same time developing and coordinating student exchange

programmes, particularly Leonardo da Vinci mobility programmes for vocational schools.

The precarious economic situation in the Radom district as well as the changing system of vocational education, calling for combining institutionalised vocational training and professional training at related enterprises (the dual education system), inspired the author of this article to take steps to render it possible for the students to develop their professional and linguistic knowledge acquired in their home country when travelling abroad, while at the same time getting to know a neighbour country, its culture, traditions and customs.

These are major elements in this day and age, when countries unite into one European community, when the job markets have opened and the supporters of the European Union appeal to us to cast aside stereotypical thinking, which deforms the reality and causes negative, often long-lasting associations that are very hard to eradicate. We need a positive approach to the cultural otherness of the inhabitants of other countries, a mutual willingness to grow to know and understand each other. If this occurred parallel to vocational training, we would achieve a constellation of factors facilitating the young people's not only vocational education, but also development in the area of intercultural competence, and consequently their effective functioning on domestic and foreign job markets.

The article presents a project organised within the framework of the Leonardo da Vinci programme, whose purpose was to implement the above discussed aspects and thus practise learning by doing, constituting an essential factor of the modern educational process.

### The Beneficiary's Characteristics

Radom, a city district with approximately 230 000 inhabitants, is located 100 km from the Polish capital, Warsaw, in the Masovian province. The surrounding region is poorly developed in terms of economy. Chart 1 below demonstrates the levels of unemployment in January 2013 in Radom and in the surrounding district:

<b>Unemployment rate (January 2013)</b>	
Radom county (land district)	31.7%
City of Radom (city district)	23.4%
<b>Number of the unemployed (February 2013)</b>	
Radom county (land district)	22 407
City of Radom (city district)	17 818

Chart 1.

Unemployment in the region of Radom.

The unemployment rate in Radom is one of the highest in Poland, with at least one unemployed parent in numerous families. Therefore, between 20% and 30% of the students in the Complex of Construction Schools in Radom, where the author teaches German, receive financial support from the school's social fund or the Social Welfare Centre.

The Kazimierz Wielki Complex of Construction Schools in Radom comprises the following schools: Basic Vocational School (two or three years, depending on the specialisation) with the possibility of further education in the Secondary Technical School of Construction in order to take the secondary school final examinations, Secondary Technical School of Construction, Secondary Technical School of Road Construction, Secondary Technical School of Geodetics, Secondary Technical School of Landscape Architecture, Secondary Technical School of Environmental Protection, Secondary Technical School of Sanitary Installations.

The school has enjoyed great popularity amongst both girls and boys over the last two decades, most probably because it offers the chance to gain a profession with good job opportunities, which is particularly important in an economically weak region such as that of Radom.

A great deal of students cannot participate in additional, paid courses or join trips in Poland or abroad due to their unfavourable financial situation. Frequently, they can rely on no one but themselves, sometimes also on the teachers' help in learning in the form of additional classes.

Classes in foreign languages (German) typically begin at the elementary level and are continued until the secondary school final examinations. Achieving efficient communication in the foreign language in the case of

less talented students is a great challenge for the teacher, especially as there are no more than two foreign language classes a week, and in the course of one out of the four years the students have only one such class a week.

Achieving the linguistic goals requires a great deal of effort and competence from the teacher; they must remember that effective work will only be possible when applying a wide variety of teaching techniques, which will motivate the students to practise self-education. Additionally, students ought to be prepared to use the language of their profession in occupational situations (Komorowska, 2000: 360). Therefore, vocational student exchange programmes are the best method to achieve the aims described above and to motivate the students to learn foreign technolects.

As already mentioned, a large part of the students come from lower-income backgrounds, which make them incapable of attaining a whole range of goals and plans, mostly those related to education. Since these students have no opportunity to visit European countries, including our Western neighbour Germany, they frequently form negative associations, often based on historically founded stereotypes and difficult relations between Poland and Germany, particularly rooted in the period of World War II. Direct intercultural contacts may help reduce the negative attitude. Only participating in an authentic situation can help an individual achieve a certain distance towards the generally accepted patterns (Adamczak-Krysztofowicz, 2012: 88) and overcome at least some of the barriers created by the hierarchical stereotypes (Nikitina, 1988: 155).

This is why it is particularly important for the target group of vocational training students to participate in projects of that type. They are namely the effect of combining an innovative approach to education and vocational training with developing intercultural openness and sensitivity in natural conditions. These components most fully answer the needs of the job market and help the participants gain distance to themselves and the surrounding world.

### The Significance of the Partner School in the Project

The Complex of Construction Schools has cooperated for many years now with the Construction Training Centre Deula in Nienburg and the Con-

struction Training Centre in Magdeburg. The latter is the Complex's partner school, and the cooperation has comprised not only projects financed from European funds, but also other cultural and social activities.

The partner schools' major success was the renewal of city partnership between Radom and Magdeburg, inaugurated with the author's and her students' visit to the mayor of Magdeburg, Lutz Trümper, in September 2005. Some time later a conference on the education systems in Poland and Germany, the states' policies and general social problems was organised in Magdeburg thanks to the support of the Construction Training Centre. The twinning agreement between the cities was signed in June 2006 and followed by a visit from the mayor of Radom to Magdeburg. It was during this visit, in which the author took part, that it was possible to lay foundations for the future exchanges and trainings in German training centres.

The Magdeburg Construction Training Centre is a large centre of vocational training in the fields of construction, landscape architecture, moulding, sculpture, ceramics, renewable energy as well as industrial safety. The centre employs well qualified teaching staff in the number of 120. Leonardo da Vinci mobility projects are carried out by teachers of professional courses in various specialisations, depending on the project theme, as well as intercultural communication competence trainers. Thanks to the Training Centre's cooperation with producers of specialist equipment, the Centre has modern devices, innovative workshop equipment and a garden for practice at its disposal. The Centre possesses, among other things, large heated rooms for practical training which can be used regardless of the season and weather conditions, in accordance with the rules of safety and European norms. Last year a new workshop room for practice in ceramics and moulding was erected.

The Training Centre possesses modern appliances and innovative workshop equipment, which is particularly valuable for the programme participants. The fact that the Centre provides all necessary didactic materials as well as tools and means required to carry out exercises and demonstrations is likewise of fundamental importance.

The Construction Training Centre in Deula, Nienburg, where the described project has been carried out, is a training centre of a similar character.

The cooperation has only lasted several years. Nonetheless, the Deula Centre is a reliable partner, who has been positively verified by numerous vocational schools and teacher training institutions in Europe. It is an optimal partner for the implementation of the project, as it has all the qualifications and competences required to carry out all its aspects, from vocational training to linguistic and cultural education.

#### Vocational Training and Intercultural Education

The author described her own experience gained during the realisation of one of the mobility projects of her own design, carried out in 2010. In this project, students of the Complex of Construction Schools in Radom had the opportunity to apply the professional knowledge gained in their home country in practice while at the same time developing their intercultural competence. The Leonardo da Vinci mobility project was carried out as a part of the Lifelong Learning Programme in the Construction Training Centre Deula in Nienburg, Germany. The project was entitled: "Planting and arranging green spaces as an opportunity to take up business activity".

Similarly as the Construction Training Centre in Magdeburg, the Construction Training Centre Deula in Nienburg has organised vocational education and training for many years. The centre ensures a high standard of education thanks to its well qualified teaching staff and constant cooperation with producers of agricultural and construction machines; it has a large number of machines and a workshop base as well as heated rooms for practical training at its disposal.

The Centre has vast experience in organising professional training in various specialities, especially in construction, ecology and agriculture, in accordance with European Union standards and norms. It frequently organises international workshops and trainings. The Centre provides very good accommodation for the trainees as well as all didactic materials and supplies necessary to carry out practical training. According to other project coordinators, the Deula Centre is a reliable partner in the organisation of trainings and exchange of experience.

The Director of the Construction Training Centre in Nienburg signed a letter of intent confirming his readiness to take up cooperation in or-



der to carry out the project in 2008. The participants were 18 students from a class specialising in landscape architecture and construction. The recruitment committee chose the participants of the project based on the following criteria: family background in an area characterised by a high unemployment rate, difficult financial situation, rudimentary command of German, at least good marks in vocational subjects and in conduct, involvement in various activities in school and outside it. Based on the information contained in the recruitment questionnaires the committee awarded the applicants a particular number of points and qualified them for the project.

Thus, the students' trip to the partner training centre was preceded by a range of preparations, as effective exchange projects cannot be spontaneous, but require perseverance, planning and the ability to negotiate. Only under such conditions can they succeed and all goals — professional, linguistic and cultural — can be achieved (Wicke, 2003: 56).

The cultural and linguistic preparations took place in the course of four months previous to the departure to the vocational training in Nienburg. They included learning foreign technical vocabulary on the relevant subject, the knowledge of which was required during the training. However, the principal element of the preparations were classes in intercultural learning, which were supposed to prepare the students for their oftentimes first encounter with another culture. The purpose of the classes was to sensitise the students to a different, unknown culture. Yet in order for the process of intercultural education to be effective, its realisation began with collecting the key information about the national culture. It is namely only through respecting and understanding one's native culture, constituting the fundamentals for society's identity (Smolińska 2012:13) that the full process of cognition may be achieved.

At the following stage the students shared their associations and fears related to their neighbours' culture. Next, the students obtained information about Germany and its culture by means of various texts, film shows and discussions. Watching the film, the students had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the city they were going to visit as well as with the Construction Training Centre. The subsequent email exchange

with the German students taking part in the project particularly inspired discussion. During this stage of the preparations, the parties could find out about each others' interests and features of character, which is a vital element in the coexistence within a cultural community. The essence of intercultural contacts is comprehending the otherness of another human being, looking for mutual understanding and attempting to see how our culture is perceived by others (Klein, 2007: 46).

The stay at the Construction Training Centre in Nienburg commenced with an official welcome of the students and their teachers by the director of the Centre and a meeting with the German students, whom Polish students had so far only known via email. During the meeting both groups learned the programme of the visit and its goals.

The schedule of the stay was organised so that the students gained knowledge and professional skills through experience while developing intercultural competence. Yet an experience whose purpose is to bring about certain effects cannot be random. It ought to be structured, subject to analysis and debate. The discourse makes it possible not only to solve problematic issues, but above all to reflect on new, surprising, unexpected, culturally bound situations. This point should form an integral part of any abroad stay, as such activities support the participants in their confrontation with unfamiliar environment and culture. It is one of the major elements of intercultural education during intercultural encounters.

Experiencing a new reality took the form of vocational practice, during which the students cooperated with their German friends, at the same time developing their cultural and linguistic contacts. In addition, they watched their vocational trainers, thus learning the rules of the foreign professional culture.

### Tasks Developing the Students' Intercultural Communication Competence

Every day of the stay included not only vocational training, but also numerous afternoon activities, offering another chance to gain intercultural experience. The more frequently the project participants had contact with their German friends during the scheduled activities, the greater the role

of external factors (direct contact, situational factors, contact frequency, participation in a group, historical background, individual factors), which in turn has an impact on the development of intercultural sensitivity. The activities included:

#### *Project:*

The students worked on their projects in two culturally varied groups. The goal of the project was to prepare a presentation on the cities of Nienburg and Radom. Each day after the vocational training classes the students met in their groups and collected materials. They used resources such as the Internet, materials brought from Poland as well as offered by the German students, and own knowledge and experience. The projects took the forms of a film or a PowerPoint presentation.

#### *Designing a dictionary:*

Another task was working on a dictionary. Students in culturally mixed groups wrote a Polish-German-English-Russian dictionary of technical vocabulary used during the professional training, including illustrations.

#### *Team-building meetings:*

Another form of classes were team-building meetings, which were supposed to bring both groups of students closer, help them overcome cultural barriers, let them become acquainted with the respective traditions and customs, and most of all help them develop intercultural competence. The meetings took the form of various games, such as guessing expressions acted out by a student, cooking together or finding specific places in the city. These meetings brought the students a great deal of joy and entertainment, but most importantly they extended their knowledge of the neighbours' country and culture.

While completing the tasks described above, the students developed their command of the language, but also their intercultural competence, which together with linguistic communication forms intercultural communication competence.

The students confirmed during evening discussions that all forms of activities brought them closer with their German partners. They definitely reduced the fears the students had nursed when arriving in Germany. The participants had expected the German partners to be distanced and unwilling to cooperate. The reality turned out to be different and overcame the stereotypes about the disapproval and impoliteness of young Germans. Polish students grew to know the way of life of another cultural community, compared their new experiences with the knowledge they had obtained in Poland, and overcame some barriers and prejudices created over the years, mostly related to aggression, self-confidence and conceit of the Germans (Prokop, 1995: 43). Polish students comprehended that an attitude towards contacts with other cultures based on stereotypes and shutting oneself in a closed range of information caused narrow-mindedness (Dębicki, 2009: 13), which young people in the era of united Europe should avoid. The students assessed exchange projects as the best tool to counteract negative stereotypes (Adamczak-Krysztowicz, 2012: 85).

Polish students were surprised at the great freedom of German students in their contacts with teachers, their right to smoke during breaks and drink beer during social gatherings. German students, on the other hand, were surprised by the subordination of Polish students to their teachers as well as the friendly relations within the Polish group, based on mutual respect and great politeness.

### The Teacher's Role during the Placement

The teacher's role during such programmes and the realisation of individual tasks is of great significance. The teacher often has to abandon the autocratic style often preferred in schools. It would seem that nowadays, when the system of education undergoes constant modernisation, it is perfectly natural that the teacher is supposed to adjust their approach to the requirements of modern didactics. Unfortunately the everyday practice appears less optimistic. Teachers seldom have the time to undertake creative activities, since they feel overburdened by the amount of duties and increasing bureaucracy. It is crucial to collect certificates of participation in various courses and trainings and to consistently and meticulously fill out

documentation of the didactic process. Can a teacher think of preparing creative classes which would motivate the students and encourage them to practise self-education in such conditions? In the light of the above considerations it seems difficult to change the approach and abandon the preferred teaching style. Yet the charge of young people during such a project poses new challenges to a teacher.

During the exchange, the teacher performs the functions of a moderator, observer, guide, diplomat, psychologist, financial expert, advisor, interpreter and guardian (Grau & Müller-Hartmann, 2004: 2). Obviously, in order to become a competent pedagogue during exchange projects, the teacher needs to gain experience through the participation in such undertakings and in the course of special trainings about EU programmes.

Over the course of many exchange projects and trainings, the author of the article attempted to be a watchful observer both during the vocational and the cultural and language classes. She moderated the classes, yet never tried to directly interfere or to influence the students. When evaluating the project in special questionnaires, the students assessed this approach most positively, deciding it was the only way for them to achieve the aims of the project.

### Conclusion of the Project Activities

At the conclusion of the training in Germany, the students took part in a final meeting, during which they assessed the entire two week stay. The final evening included a film demonstrating the work on the project, a panel discussion, an exchange of gifts and the distribution of certificates of participation.

The international character of the project allowed the students to become acquainted with new technologies and solutions as well as to acquire new practical skills related to construction and landscape architecture while training in a modern, well equipped education centre in Nienburg. All these elements improved the quality of work and learning in the Complex of Construction Schools in Radom, as the students were able to use the expertise during everyday practical activities and above all during their vocational examinations, which are of great significance in vocational training.

The students received the Europass Mobility document, confirming their having acquired particular professional skills. Europass Mobility is meant to help Europeans looking for employment in the European Union by recording their skills and professional qualifications. This document facilitates job search abroad, as the applicants do not need to send the employers tons of documents translated into a foreign language and notarised. It also helps the employers, who can compare the Europasses of candidates from various EU member states and choose the best employee more easily. Very often acquiring this document gave the students a one-time opportunity to obtain qualifications necessary to register their own business activity, find a job and their own place on the European labour market.

Having returned to Poland, the students submitted their reports via the application Rap4Leo. Their remarks became an important guideline for the project coordinators when creating new project applications. Apart from that, a conference with the participants and their vocational courses teachers was organised, the aim being the exchange of experience after the training. Finally, a film show for representatives of construction and architecture companies was organised, demonstrating new technologies and methods of work used in Germany.

## Conclusions

The vocational Leonardo da Vinci project described in the article is one of numerous intercultural meetings of vocational character designed and coordinated by the author. Such projects are the best tools to apply theoretical knowledge and to learn by doing. Tasks and activities comprised in the schedule let the participants acquire professional skills they could not have gained in their home country as well as have new intercultural experiences developing their intercultural competence and overcome the linguistic barrier. The constellation of all those elements not only leads to the multidimensional effectiveness of the project, but also creates an added value which justifies the subsidies granted to the project.

Moreover, the project poses new challenges to teachers, who need to detach themselves at least for a moment from the complex mechanisms of

today's educational bureaucracy and become more flexible in order to act effectively.

The new EU programme Erasmus Plus, which has begun on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2014, creates the opportunity for all teachers to abandon the fossilised system they have acted and thought in so far. It is also an opportunity to pursue the intercultural and vocational goals discussed in this article, especially since the new seven-year programme budget amounts to 14,7 billion euro, which means a 40% rise in comparison to the previous editions of the EU programmes in the field of education.

The author would like to express her hope that the article will motivate all teachers who wish to render the didactic process more interesting and effective. Student exchange programmes pose a great challenge, but in the end they bring great satisfaction not only to their authors and coordinators, but also to all the students, and it is them who are the essential element of the didactic process.

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