

# Results Topic 2 - Language barriers

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Student's meeting Oswestry April 10th - 17th 2016

One main objective of this project is to increase the employability of young people across Europe. The project aims to engage students with education - i.e. increasing the qualifications of young people and also to enhance application to other skill bases such as language attainment. In reality, however, we often encounter reluctance to study foreign languages. Especially British teachers find it hard to motivate students to do so. These students seem to feel that being competent in English is enough; even abroad the English usually get by with their native language alone.

However, learning languages is about more than just „getting by“. Young people who learn foreign languages are often found to have a better, more systematic understanding of how languages work in general, and also with regard to their native language. Even if they haven't yet reached proficiency in any foreign language, to a future employer a young person's language studies show interest in communication generally. Being interested in communication and willing to do so is imperative in the globalized european job market, not only but especially for more ambitious careers. Therefore we regard it as our duty to motivate students to learn foreign languages, even if the benefits of doing so are often not palpable to them.

For the week in Oswestry, England, the teachers agreed on the following **research questions**:

- 1. How do we motivate students to learn foreign languages?**
- 2. What are the missing communicative skills of students when they leave school to work in various industries?**

Our findings, of course, were not conclusive. Nevertheless, we were able to find some interesting results to be shown in the following.

## 1. Motivation

One problem all language teachers face on a daily basis is students crying out: „ Why do I have to learn this, this is useless to me!“ However, foreign language English teachers face this problem much less than, for instance, French or German second language teachers. Why is that? The answer is, obviously, because English skills are useful for most young people on an almost daily basis. They are aware of the languages' status within Europe as the lingua franca. They want to be able to participate in that common cultural space and, therefore, study the language willingly and relatively easily. Students of other foreign languages, in contrast, feel they are not getting a decent return of their investment; Even if a teacher has high credibility in students' eyes, his or her motivational techniques are hardly ever enough to justify long hours of studying.

Activities during this week included a language workshop. Each country prepared a game, a presentation or a quiz to teach kids from other partner nations a few words in their language. The words were supposed to be used later during the week at an outdoor activity camp, where the student's of different countries would be able to cheer each other on using exclusively other languages than English. The teachers realized quickly that it wasn't motivating students to learn some foreign words for that purpose. It's superfluous: Why learning something complicated when English words, which they already knew, would do just fine? To be sure: During the entire week the students used English exclusively to communicate with students from other countries and their native language to talk to their friends from home.

However, during the workshops the kids did play along and try to learn words in other languages than English. It seemed fun to them to pick up some words in each language even if their goal wasn't to use them for content-based communication. During the week it became clear that using almost random words (yes, swear words, too) in different languages the kids showed

interest in each other. They seemed to say: Hey, I know some words in your language; I care about who you are and how you talk. That is **context-based communication**: within this special context the words didn't communicate their primary meaning, but symbolized something entirely else: interest and curiosity, which is the foundation of forming international relationships on a personal level.

The students found it motivational to be able to engage with a native speaker of the respective language and, it seemed, would have found it impolite to show disinterest. Even though English was always there to fall back on for communication student's became more aware of the linguistic plurality of Europe. They were able to compare their language skills with other students of the same age group. During the week the Swiss students realized that the Dutch have some similar words in their language. And it came as a bit of a shock to them to realize that the Greek students not only learn English as a second language like everybody else, they have to master an entirely new script to do so.

The question remains: How do we motivate students to study languages when there is no immanent communicative need for them to do so? It's probably just a small percentage of student that are able to be sufficiently motivated by future job prospects and grades alone. Is it possible that, for those many students that aren't, it's not worth it to study foreign languages at all? As this week has shown, however, even student's with limited foreign languages interests are willing to learn some words in this **social context**. If we as teachers are able to provide students with contexts like these (project-based communication opportunities with partner schools) it's much more likely they will apply themselves out of curiosity towards other teenagers, as opposed to studying in conventional settings (classroom situation). Especially the method of **reciprocal teaching** among students as we applied in our workshop seemed productive: the students liked to show other kids their own words and - at the very least - felt obliged to show interest towards the others in return.

## 2. The missing communicative skills

A visit was planned to a company that operates internationally with highly skilled employees. During that visit we wanted to find some answers to that question. Unfortunately, the company cancelled due to scheduling issues. Instead we visited Arla, a cheese factory, that is also operating within Europe, but was less ideal for our field of interest, since they primarily hire less skilled employees. Anyway, among our group of experienced teachers we came up with mainly one missing skill, that everybody agreed on: foreign languages. It's a paradoxical situation: Students don't come in contact with foreign languages (except English) and a daily basis. Yet they are indispensable for many careers in a globalized economy. The teacher's task is to make that fact more part of student's experiences.

As we've seen during this project visit the students tend to cling to their friends from home and find it hard to immerse themselves with the other participants. Of course this is partly due to shyness, to not being used to situations like this. Adding to the problem is the language barrier that the students find really hard to overcome. Even towards the English students, speaking a semi-familiar language, our kids exhibited reluctance to communicate. Why? They had the knowledge to make themselves understood but tried to avoid to do so.

Speaking a foreign language in an unfamiliar context with native speakers seems to require a communicative skill that most of the students are only just starting to develop. It is important that schools provide students with opportunities to develop and practice this skill, since it's a starting point from which foreign language proficiency can be reached. Only if a student is able to take the step out of the classroom into real communicative situations studying foreign languages really starts to make sense. It's a different skill than knowing a foreign language. In a way, our normative way of teaching foreign languages increases a fear to make mistakes, which can lead to inhibitions to communicate altogether. This can lead to students who are able to read in a foreign language and, sometimes, even write, but won't speak the language. Or - even worse - students refuse to learn the language altogether because they think the goal is to become flawless and - upon realization that they won't be able to reach that goal - give up on the subject altogether.

## Summary

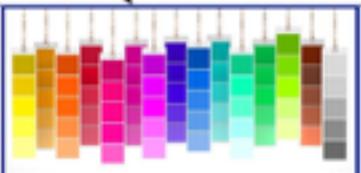
The way to handle these issues seems to be clear: We need to stop teaching foreign languages deficit oriented. If we count the mistakes a student makes and use this as the base for grades almost exclusively, they assume the goal is not to make any mistakes at all. With languages, however, this is a useless goal. It's virtually impossible to learn a foreign language to completion in a school setting exclusively. We as teachers should set a more realistic and useful goal: **Learn to communicate!** Instead of deducting points every time a student makes a mistake, we should reward them with points every time they communicate successfully. To do that we have to create real - not fake - communication opportunities, which motivates them to practice. By doing that they will get better at the language as a linguistic system as well as building communicative skills in overcoming language barriers in general.

## Material designed by students:

A memory to teach students from partner schools a few words in Swiss German:

Ivana, Vincenzo, Jamie

Erasmus England

Stahn uf	
Sitz ab	
pfiff	
Klatsch drü mal	
Zeig dini liebingsfarb	
rächts	

Ivana, Vincenzo, Jamie

Erasmus England

links	
lauf	
stop	
gump	
ufe	
abe	

Ivana, Vincenzo, Jamie

Erasmus England

Drei dich	
Seg mal öppis	
Ich lieb dich	