

Across the Borders

A SOKRATES/Comenius 1*) Project opened up new ways for students and teachers at the Schulen des bfi Wien by Claudia Zekl

Early in November 2001 a colleague of mine and I went to Kuopio, Finland to take part in the first meeting that was the starting point of a project called "A European Co-operation as to the aims of language teaching and learning". An international cooperation of teachers and students from Linnanpellon lukio in Kuopio, Finland, the Robert-Schumann Berufskolleg für Wirtschaft und Verwaltung in Essen, Germany and the Pálffy Miklós Kereskedelmi Középiskola in Győr, Hungary. There, in a world that is totally different to ours, the concept for this project was developed, aims were agreed upon and dates were planned.

Over the next three years, our students then worked on sets of teaching materials meant for use in English lessons at our school. Each of these sets consisted of the original texts in English (dealing with 6 different topics: the world of work, applications and job interviews, cross-cultural communication, business meetings, trade fairs and product presentations and area studies), a dictionary consisting of word and phrase lists in German, English, Turkish, Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian, Hungarian and Finnish and various exercises e. g. questions about the text, cross-word puzzles, gapped texts, etc.

The aim of this project was to help our students find useful ways of how to broaden their own knowledge of the English language with a special focus on their lexical skills using newspaper articles as a starting point. In the course of time they learned to differentiate between new words that are worth remembering and those that are not (the crucial question they always had in mind here was: which words do I really need if I want to talk about the topic in question), to find the right translation for these words in their mother tongues and to make use of these words when producing exercises for other students

at our school.

Thus, our students got an insight in what it means to produce attractive teaching materials and made big progress. The constant search for useful phrases, expressions and words, and the constant creation of exercises had a big effect on their own English skills. All this helped them to find it easier to express their own ideas and thoughts simply because they had a bigger background knowledge of the topics, as well as a larger repertoire of language they could draw upon.

There was a lot of work for the students in each of the four project partner countries. After these three years the collection of texts, word lists and exercises now consists of several hundred pages which represent the diligence, commitment and progress of the students.

In the course of these three years there were many moments that motivated the students to continue their work, e. g. whenever one of the chapters was finished. But there was still something else: those students who showed the greatest commitments to this project could accompany us teachers to the two project meetings every year. So they had the opportunity to visit other countries, to get into contact with their project partners, to get to know other ways of life and traditions and to get an insight into different European school systems.

These meetings were always a series of touching and interesting moments: slowly getting to know each other at the beginning, speaking English with people from other corners of the world, getting used to different ways of life which often formed the beginning of many a friendship across the borders of Europe, then taking leave from each other and looking forward to probably meeting each other again at one of the next meetings.

When the project ended in 2004 all students and teachers agreed it had really been worth participating



in. In 2003 this project was even awarded the ESIS (Europasiegel für Innovative Sprachprojekte) and this was a great reward for the students and their work.

A profound knowledge of the English language, an openness to people from other cultures, memories of the various journeys – those are the things that will remain with us, and hopefully so will also all the international contacts and friendships.

*) We take the liberty of pointing to the fact that the responsibility for the contents of this article lies with the Schulen des *bfi Wien* only and does not represent the opinion of the European Commission or one of its affiliates and that the European Commission cannot be accounted for any use of the information given here.

Personal Profile:



Claudia Zekl was born in Vienna. After finishing a Handelsakademie she studied English and French at the university in Vienna. She has been a teacher of English at the Schulen des *bfi Wien* since 1996 where she works in the day and evening

school and is the head of the project HAK/HAS *bfi* meets Haupt- and Mittelschule. She is also a trainer of English in the courses of *bfi Wien* preparing students for the Berufsreifeprüfung as well as a teacher trainer at the PI des Bundes and the PI der Stadt Wien, author of English teaching materials, head of the ARGE of English teachers at Handelsakademien and Handelsschulen in Vienna and vice-chair of the **TEA** committee.