

## Using News Media and Facebook in Cross-Cultural Links: An Action Research Project in Croatia and Iceland

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**Abstract:** A small number of students, aged 15-18, from two secondary schools in Croatia and Iceland, participated in a two year action research project between November 2016 and November 2018 on how the use of news media and Facebook sharing might impact on language learning. We found that the use of social media and watching TV/films without subtitles are helpful and have a positive impact on language skills development. Online gaming also improved language competence. However, technology has to meet the students' needs in order to keep their interest. We are now building on the initial action research findings through an Erasmus+ project.

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**Keywords:** action research, Croatia, Iceland, vocational education, social media, new technologies.

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### Introduction

I am a teacher advisor for English in the Technical School for Construction and Land Surveying in Split, Croatia. This is a vocational secondary school. Since 1982, I have been giving instruction and support in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) and TESP (Teacher Education for Languages for Specific Purposes) courses in that same school. Additionally, I am a county coordinator for initial teacher training and continuing professional development of English teachers in vocational secondary schools in Split-Dalmatia County. Before my current role, I was a Head of English in the same vocational secondary school. My own professional development has been at a national and an international level, including several workshops and conferences of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) in Graz, Austria, as outlined in Table 1.

### Using News Media and Facebook in Cross-Cultural Links

I took part in the workshop Action research communities for language teachers, workshop and network meeting, in Graz, in ECML, in November 2016. In the project, *Using News Media and Facebook in Cross-Cultural Links* Croatia and Iceland were involved. I was working with Icelandic colleagues and Croatian student-participants. We created a Facebook group called **Action project Ice-Cro 2016**.

The participants chosen to work on the project from Croatia were one female and nine male participants who had shown willingness to accept others and 'otherness'; and displayed considerable potential as students so my findings are perhaps only replicable with able and motivated students.

**Table 1: Personal Record of Professional Development**

Date	Location	Conference/Workshop Title
27-29 Sep 2007	ECML, Graz, Austria	Languages for social cohesion
4-5 Dec 2008	ECML, Graz, Austria	DOTS: Developing Online Teaching Skills
15-16 Dec 2009	ECML, Graz, Austria	Majority language instruction as basis for plurilingual education
7-8 Jun 2010	Sarajevo, Croatia	Plurilingual education in Europe. Workshop: The plurilingual experience in Croatia: education in the language and script of national minorities
23-24 Sep 2010	ECML, Graz, Austria	Training teachers to use the European Language Portfolio (ELP-TT3)
7-9 Apr 2011	Ljubljana, Slovenia	Intercultural education for everyday practice: Pedagogical illusion or practicable reality?
29 Sep-1 Oct 2011	ECML, Graz, Austria	Empowering Language Professionals
14-15 Feb 2013	ECML, Graz, Austria	Diversity in majority language learning (MALEDIVE)
10-11 Nov 2016	ECML, Graz, Austria	Action research communities for language teachers: initial workshop
3-4 May 2018	ECML, Graz, Austria	Action research communities for language teachers: network meeting

Despite my long professional experience, I had always wanted to change my approach to language teaching and learning. I wanted to make it more attractive, interesting, challenging, creative, enjoyable and less stressful. My previous teaching experience did not involve using tools like new technology, news media and social networks such as Facebook. It relied on textbooks, workbooks, grammar books and dictionaries; and it was restricted to work in the classroom. Having observed my previous teaching practice and experience and having analysed previous assignments, I gradually began building and establishing new approaches to language teaching and learning, introducing new ideas into it (Please see the **Appendix** for details of the new assignments I devised).

I could see that through social media use, learners enhance four language skills: listening and reading comprehension, spoken interaction and production and writing skills. Learners benefit from social media tools because they have a more interactive, better educational and more interesting language experience. Their language knowledge improved through communicating online or sharing various forms of contents such as: videos, images, presentations, articles and personal updates. With hindsight, this should be the expected outcome because everything is online today and most young people learn English through media and the Internet. It makes their communication with other people more consistent and a lot easier. Below are two comments from students after having experienced learning English through social media and the Internet:

*It's easier to learn English at home through media, step by step, without any stress.*

*Probably, in the years to come, more people would learn new languages through social media.*

From my own perspective, I must consider these key issues in a language education evaluation:

- Learners' potential, creativity, responsibility, autonomy and self-confidence
- Students' learning styles and techniques
- Skills in speaking, writing, listening, reading and communication
- Competence of pronunciation and knowledge of language structures
- Cooperation and teamwork activities,
- Feedback, and finally teacher's responsibility.

Before I started on the project, in my teaching practice I had avoided incorporating different learning styles in student groups that invariably consisted of learners with varying abilities. Because of my involvement in the project, I have started involving learners of different abilities in teamwork activities. The aim was to enhance their cooperation and communication skills, and this strategy has produced both enjoyable and effective. Furthermore, I wanted to receive feedback on how I might change my instruction to help less able students perform better in the class. I also wanted to find a way for a more participating approach for such students. It brought to change of the old boring teaching methods- students' book based, including the assignments students have been familiar with but thoroughly dislike.

Before, practical activities included exercises that students would choose to do in class: individually, in pairs, in groups or working in a team. All activities related to criteria of the Common European Framework for Reference (CEFR) with regard to English as a Foreign Language, which describes what a learner is able to do in reading, listening, speaking and writing at six different levels. Introducing new and a totally unknown set of assignments in the Facebook Group helped Croatian students display their language potential and creativity and helped me as a teacher build new approaches to language teaching. I felt that students' competitive spirit and the constant challenge led to the development of their higher personal language profile. At the same time, it improved standards in language teaching. In the classroom practice, the message sent to the students has a great effect, especially if it is new.

During our project, we investigated how we can enhance pupils' language skills by using news media and Facebook sharing in language teaching.

Firstly, I was not sure if I was going to make the students aware of the news media in the target language (in this case English), giving them a weekly task, for example, to find a news article on English/American websites and share it inside a Facebook group. I sometimes did not know if the students would accept commenting on news articles with a status explaining the topic and giving a reason for their choice. I was surprised to discover that they accepted every challenge and did so successfully, but perhaps I should not have been. The most recent technology and social media young people grow up with and spend a big portion of their time on, increase their language knowledge. They also affect their everyday lives, whether it be school, work or fun, whether it be studying at home, at school or being on the move. Nowadays, people of all ages frequently use mobile phones, tablets, laptops and computers. The use of ICT is widespread and popular even with very young children. Below are some comments from students participants on using news media and Facebook in language learning:

*Just by listening to cartoons and movies when you are young, you become better at understanding the language and speaking it. I never tried to learn English from some tutorial books or dictionaries when I was a kid. My language skills have gotten a lot better by talking to people online or gaming. **Student1***

*Language itself in my opinion is a way easier to learn browsing YouTube, Facebook and all social stuff than in school. What I mean by that is, you learn how to speak yourself but school teaches you grammar, at least that's how I learned English. I can easily now watch movies without captions because I've been into English for a lot by watching movies and communicating with strangers online. **Student2***

*Social media and television definitely have a big impact on language skills. At least in my case. Since I've joined Facebook I always stayed in contact with people that speak English. That has helped me a lot. If there weren't social media and television I wouldn't know English as well. **Student3***

*A lot of us played so many online games and everyone who did, will know that you can't play good if you can't communicate with other people, so, I think it is a pretty good way of learning a new language and also improving it. **Student4***

*I think that most people in modern time learn English through Internet. In my opinion, only the basics and grammar are taught in schools. **Student5***

*I would bet everyone in this group learned English from movies/videogames better than taking extra English classes. **Student6***

Certainly, the students are now much more aware of the role of news media in the target language inside the Facebook group. They found the experience challenging, educational, useful, intriguing, informative, encouraging and helpful. The teacher took great care to explain to them the purpose of improving language knowledge this way. At the same time, we created cultural links between two language groups and the countries involved. Language instruction should always include the cultural background of language taught or the cultural context of a target language.

## **The action research process, step by step**

### **Learning outcomes**

Firstly, teachers explained to the students the focus of the learning outcomes for the project activity, which includes understanding of written and spoken language in various types of news articles, oral skills and presentations of written texts. Secondly, we taught learners how to use the most recent technology and social media in order to increase their language knowledge. Thirdly, we made them aware of news media in the target language and became creators of cross-cultural communication inside the language group.

## Teaching materials and aids

We introduced students to the teaching materials and aids such as the Facebook group they were going to work in (**Action project Ice-Cro 2016**). Both Croatian and Icelandic teachers created assignments in English.

There were a couple of additional assignments suggested by Icelandic teachers only, which were also included in the project with the aim to analyse them and find themes in students' choice, to see if there is anything in their choice that surprised me or my Icelandic colleague. It was interesting to see if there is a difference in how and what students choose in Iceland and Croatia, if Croatian students are more interested in politics, lifestyle, sports etc. than Icelandic students. The boys think the girls are interested in the lives of celebrities, and in beauty. The girls think the boys are interested in cars etc. Furthermore, a difference in choice of material when they have a free choice, when boys are choosing for girls and vice versa was interesting to read. The choice of material for their teacher to read was also very interesting. Mostly, the articles are on gun carrying, gun control and a royal wedding.

The next step was getting to know tools. We introduced online teaching tools to the students for use in the language classroom and put them in totally new and intriguing situations (See Appendix for details.)

## Findings

I observed that learning using ICT helped Croatian students display their language potential and high quality of performance with ease, and me, as a teacher, to build new approaches to language teaching. I felt improving standards in language education either in theoretical knowledge or in pedagogical skills. I discovered that if students express their issues and needs, a teacher could advance the way of instruction. Constant development of teaching/learning environment and developing partnership with students accepting their ideas and suggestions is productive. Technological advancements support language teaching and learning environment fully and keep it improving all the time.

Reflection is seen as an important process that enables any professional to learn from own experiences so that new perspectives can be taken. It should be improving the quality of our work, identifying students' learning needs, can lead to the development on a professional and personal level. It is important for future planning and goal setting. In the written assignments, Croatian students enhanced not only their reading and writing skills but also gradually improved their language capacity in the Facebook virtual collaboration space. I have been using the most recent technology, which is a great way to facilitate a teaching and learning process. Alongside the technology, I also used evaluation questionnaires, in which the students involved, expressed their opinions on the activities given, as explained in Table 2:

**Table 2: Student Feedback (n=11)**

Feedback Question	Student Response	Further comments
Are the written assignments clearly defined?	Yes = 100%	Assignments are perfect = 22%; Very satisfied with assignments = 11%; Assignments are okay = 11%; Assignments are all well-formulated = 11%
Do the assignments use language that helps you to know what you are expected to produce?	Yes = 89%	More than that = 11%
Can you understand the purpose of the assignments? (What would it be?)	Yes = 34%,	Improved writing and social skills = 22%; Better understanding of project = 11%; Improved speaking and communication = 11%; Expanded language knowledge = 11%
Can you articulate a claim about a particular subject in the assignments?	Yes = 34% (sports, weather, news)	Can articulate a claim = 33%; Can articulate a claim in a lot of subjects = 11%; Can articulate a claim on assignment about Nikola Tesla = 45%
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?	No = 45%	The assignments are perfect=22% Very satisfied with them=11% They are all right=11% They are all well-formulated=11%

I feel encouraged by the results of the students' feedback. Every student stated that the written assignments are clearly defined, which is a fantastic outcome. Almost all of them (89%) also believed that the assignments used language that helped them to know what they had to produce, with the remaining 11% even stating that they did more than that. The responses for the next two questions tell me that there is still some work to do. Just over one third believed that they understood the purpose of the assignments, or that they could articulate a claim about a particular subject in the assignments. However, nearly half of the group did not feel that further improvements were necessary. 22% of the students said the assignments are perfect, 11% were very satisfied with them, a further 11% said they are all right and finally 11% stated that they are all well-formulated.

## Final thoughts

I implemented action research tools during the project steps with the following aims in mind:

- evaluate those new assignments in order to develop them for further and better use
- compare the language levels of the already finished assignments (B1/B2)
- increase the students' oral and writing skills.

The data were analysed collecting the questionnaires from the students involved. I found out if students express their impressions a teacher can advance the way of instruction. Constantly developing teaching and learning environment and partnership with students accepting their ideas and suggestions is productive. I especially developed observational skills, as one of the action research tools in this particular case, to help me

use the shared articles in more ways than I have done until now. The most recent technology introduced to my language classroom helped me increase the students' language knowledge. Since then I have been using a wider range of ICT tools, which is a great way to facilitate a teaching and learning process. It is going to be a major step forward in letting the students have freedom of expression, doing various activities and assignments through a personalised learning approach that respects individual abilities for making progress. One thing has held true: Throughout my teaching practice, I have learned that each student has her/his own strengths, weaknesses and individual needs that as a teacher I have to identify and take into account with great care.

## Moving On

We are now building on our findings from this initial action research through an Erasmus+ project '**From Facebook to Face2Face: Cross-Cultural relations through Social Media and Beyond**' which involves the cross-cultural communication and relationship between high-school students in Croatia and Iceland, both on-line, via Facebook and other Social Media, and in person, with students from each country visiting the others. Specifically, we do not use social media solely for the purpose of cross-cultural interaction. It is also used as a vital part of the teaching and learning environment, with assignments and projects handed in, and thus shared, in a common Facebook group for both Croatian and Icelandic students. This creates a new dimension in the social learning space. It empowers foreign language classes by improving students' language skills, broadening their cultural competences and interests, networking and exchanging information and personal impressions relating to their fields of interest, such as, filming and presenting cultural city sights, cultural events, sport achievements on both national and local basis, commenting on the most recent intriguing events and inventions.

If you would like further information on either project, please feel free to contact me.

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## Appendix: Assignment Tasks

### Assignment 1

Watch a video clip in our Facebook group in which a student speaks about his dog and spending time with him. <https://youtu.be/VRDZQwKpRK4>. Listen to him speaking about his dog. Spending time with a pet can have a positive impact on your mood and health. Is it true? Write a short essay in English (100-200 words) and post it under a video clip shared in our Facebook group. Do not use Google Translate or copy-paste.

### Assignment 2

Some people may look at graffiti as modern art some think it is vandalism. Graffiti is a powerful way of expressing talent, creativity, culture, as well as social and political views. What do you think? Write a short essay in English (100-200 words) and post it under a photo shared in our Facebook group. Do not use Google Translate.

### Assignment 3

Write a review (100-200 words) of a magazine or newspaper article you have read recently. The following points need to be included: the type of magazine/newspaper in the article appeared, the content of the article, the message the article was trying to convey, what you personally have learned from the article. Do not use Google Translate.

### Assignment 4

Watch the entire news programme and write a summary in English. Write two-three sentences on those news items that interested you the most. Do not use Google Translate or copy-paste.

### Assignment 5

Choose a news article in English that you would like to share with your classmates and write a short summary in English (100-200 words). Post it with the article that you will share in the Facebook group. What is the article about and why did you choose it? Do not use Google Translate or copy-paste.

### Assignment 6

Go to [website] and read an article on the greatest invention of all times. Answer the following questions:

- 1) Who do you mostly agree with and why?
- 2) What do you think is the most important invention of all times?

Write in your own words a short summary in English (100-200 words) and do not use Google Translate.

### Assignment 7

A hobby is an activity for enjoyment, practised regularly in one's leisure time. Watch this video clip <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfZhZ1s5TYg>. This guy's hobby is restoring cars. He has gained substantial skill and knowledge in that area. My hobby is playing a musical instrument. Do you have any hobbies? Do you engage in any sports or



in artistic projects such as acting, painting, drawing, writing fantasy stories etc.? Write a short essay in English (100-200 words). Do not use Google Translate.

### **Assignment 8**

Watch an interview on watching movies [https://youtu.be/Hfh2dDh\\_Os8](https://youtu.be/Hfh2dDh_Os8). A student is interviewing a fellow student.

Do you enjoy watching movies? Who with? Do you usually read reviews to find out what critics say about the movie you want to watch? What kind of movies do you like (e.g. movies with a good story line, great acting, or special effects)? Do you like watching movies at home or do you prefer going to a cinema? Write in your own words a short essay in English (100-200 words). Do not use Google Translate.

### **Assignment 9**

RAP-rhythm and poetry is something between speech, poetry and singing. Do you know any good rap songs that you like? Do the songs have messages behind the words? Is it the storytelling or showing true feelings? Sometimes metaphors are used in rap lyrics. Write in your own words a short essay in English (100-200 words) and do not use Google Translate. Here's a video clip <https://youtu.be/dLoPz2iuENg>

### **Assignment 10**

Croatia and Iceland are always playing football against each other. Sometimes we are playing handball against each other. Compare the best/worst results for Iceland and Croatia in football and handball. Write a presentation on the issues in the target language. Do not use Google translate or copy-paste. Looking forward to your comments. Good luck!

### **Assignment 11**

Boys: Find a news article that you think would be interesting for girls. Girls: Find a news piece that you think would be interesting for boys.

- In class: Choose the article and post it on Facebook.

Write a short presentation of the piece (of info) in English.

### **Assignment 12**

Choose the first news article that catches your interest. Use 10 minutes to find an interesting piece of info and post it on Facebook. Write about the piece of information in English.

### **Assignment 13**

Find an article you think your teacher would be interested in reading.

In class: Choose the article and post it on Facebook.

Write a short presentation of the piece of info in the target language.

### **Assignment 14**

"Yes it is spring but I live in Iceland."

Write a presentation of the statement in the target language.

**Assignment 15**

Nikola Tesla was a man who lit up the world. He famously said, "Let the future tell the truth and evaluate each one according to his work and accomplishments. The present is theirs; the future for which I have really worked is mine." Write in your own words a short essay in English (100-200 words) explaining his statement. Do not use Google Translate. Looking forward to your essays! Good luck!