

Erasmus+ Small-Scale Partnerships: Project Design and Results

Oldřich Břenek

Introduction

International project cooperation in the teaching of foreign languages is a very important factor; not only for university departments themselves, but especially for the teachers. These cooperations allow for sharing experiences, teaching methods, learning new practices and seeing possible differences between foreign departments. The foreign experience is also very beneficial for the students who, among other things, come into contact with the authentic environment of that particular language. The current offer for university students and teachers is very diverse; both shorter or longer internships are possible and frequently used not only within the Erasmus+ programme, but also, for example, within CEEPUS or Aktion Austria–Czech Republic.

Nevertheless, not all university divisions involved in teaching have their own students and academics with the required academic positions and publishing potential to engage in these types of academic cooperations. This text deals with the new possibility of project cooperation for university language centres, which often do not have the status of a department but are categorized as a faculty or specialized division.

Language centres at Czech universities are an important and essential hub for quality language education in the tertiary sphere. Compared to the academic staff of philology departments, language centre lecturers face more teaching per week but fewer demands on regular publishing and other academic duties, which is also described by the results of the survey conducted in 2020 among language teachers of CASAJC language centres. According to this survey, 41% of respondents teach an average of 10–16 hours per week and 33% teach up to 16–20 hours per week.¹ More than 80% of the language teachers surveyed would like to improve their qualifications, e.g., by participating in international workshops and mobilities abroad. That is why the target audience of this report are colleagues from other language centres, who, like the author, seek new opportunities for project cooperation. As seen in the survey results, potential project participation seems to be beneficial for the improvement of qualifications, based on a participation in workshops, stays abroad, and setting an example of best practice. This report offers real-world-experience with a specific project opportunity and it will begin

¹ Find more details: <https://journals.muni.cz/casalc-review/article/view/15644>

by taking a look at how a university language centre can work with a private foreign language school.

Erasmus+ Opportunities

As already mentioned, the Erasmus+ offers internships abroad for students and also for academics, especially in the framework of the Erasmus+ Staff Mobility for Training or Erasmus+ Staff Mobility for Teaching. Both of these are well known and extensively used by university language teachers as well. Additionally, the Erasmus programme offers opportunities for developing teaching competences, cooperation with foreign institutions and work on exciting and beneficial projects together with international partners. A unique possibility can be “Partnerships for Cooperation of the Key Action 2”², which newly include “Small-scale Partnerships”. Compared to the larger and often academically focused Cooperation Partnerships³, this kind of cooperation “includes lower grant amounts awarded to organisations, shorter duration and simpler administrative requirements aims at reaching out to grassroots organisations, less experienced organisations and newcomers to the Programme, reducing entry barriers to the programme for organisations with smaller organisational capacity”.⁴ Project applications may be in the fields of school education, adult education, vocational education, and training, youth, and sport. Under this new type of cooperation, it is not possible to apply for a project in the field of Higher Education, which may not be an obstacle but more of an advantage for language centres. The following report will present how the gap can be filled to the benefit and development of all involved participants.

Small scale, big opportunity

The Language Centre at the Faculty of Arts of Palacký University in Olomouc (CJV FF UP)⁵ had long been seeking cooperation with a smaller, private language school from an English-speaking country which would serve the demographic of young adults. A fortuitous opening arose in 2021 in relation to the Erasmus+ Small-scale Partnerships. Coincidentally, a year before the application for this new type of project, the Language Centre Director visited the ACET⁶ school in Cork, Ireland. He was one of the many very satisfied graduates of that school’s inten-

² <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2/partnerships-cooperation>

³ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2/cooperation-partnerships>

⁴ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2/small-scale-partnerships>

⁵ <https://civ.upol.cz/>

⁶ ACET (Active Centre of English Training), find more details: <https://www.acetireland.ie/>

sive language courses, and therefore had first-hand experience of the capabilities, methods, and materials used by the ACET team. This Irish language school fulfilled all the criteria as a potential project partner, but at that time there were no relevant project opportunities. With great excitement about the opportunity, the Language Centre (CJV) applied for a one-year Small-scale Partnership in the spring of 2022. ACET and the CJV worked together on the project application for several months, had many fruitful discussions on the Zoom platform, divided tasks and roles in the project together, designed common deliverables, and got to know one another from the very beginning.

International and efficient

The situation at that time was also supported by the idea of creating a meaningful project together. Since the spring of 2020, the world experienced unexpected large-scale changes due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic also directly affected all levels of education. Unfortunately, the transition to online teaching, especially at the beginning, was not easy and sometimes was ineffective. Both project partners — CJV in Olomouc and ACET in Ireland — reflected on the increased demand from frustrated secondary school students for language tutoring.

Therefore, a common project was designed to focus on final-year secondary school students who needed to improve their communication skills in English. These were motivated students not only from the Czech Republic, but also from countries such as Spain, Portugal, and France, who were students who had already expressed an interest in this type of course at the Irish ACET. The task was therefore, on the basis of a two-week intensive joint online course, to catch up as much as possible with shortcomings in their spoken English, as affected by the pandemic disruption. This involved competent native speakers as well. For each of the project partners, the future joint cooperation was a great challenge, as they were institutions from different backgrounds. Nevertheless, there was an expectation that they would complement each other perfectly and that each member would bring their indispensable input to the project. The university language centre's experience in the formal and non-formal education of young adults and the centre's experience in language testing and online teaching was also a benefit. ACET's advantage was its experience with international youth and intercultural approaches, in comparison to the language courses offered by the CJV, which are mostly attended only by Czech students.

ISCOLANG. Here you are.

ACET and CJV jointly submitted a project application and named their project “ISCOLANG”⁷, which was a suitable acronym for Improving Secondary School Students’ Skills in English Based on Teaching Cooperation Between Two Proactive Language Centres. Immediately after the positive approval of the project application, in November 2021, they worked on deepening cooperation, and sharing experience, both online and in person.

The project period itself was for twelve months, from November 2021 to October 2022. All team members from the partner institutions were in regular contact with one another during the project period. It included preplanned Zoom meetings related to the didactics of English language teaching of the target group, which were very beneficial. The project also enabled the team members to visit the partner workplace in person and get acquainted with the local environment and teaching before the main workshop ran. The week-long stay at the language school in Cork was very beneficial especially for all four Czech colleagues involved. They were able to get acquainted with the work of a commercial international workplace, oriented mainly on intensive courses for young people from many countries around the world. It was an unforgettable experience not only in the observation of selected lessons, but especially the subsequent discussions with Irish colleagues about the teaching materials used and work in an intercultural environment.

The managing director of ACET, Joelle Coade, expressed great satisfaction during the cooperation with CJV at Palacký University: “We were impressed by the excellence and methods of teaching of the English teachers at the Palacký University Language Centre. We regard them as equal partners of our carefully-selected teachers at ACET. It’s not easy to be one of the best language schools in Ireland.”

The main project outcome, a two-week online intensive course, focused on the secondary school students from various European countries, it was fee-free, conducted online, and aimed to demonstrate that this could effectively improve conversational competence within a relatively short time period. The course was held from 22 August 2022 to 2 September 2022, each teaching session was conducted in 120 minutes in the afternoon. The registration was opened at the end of July 2022, publicised on social media sites of both partner institutions. From several advertisements for the possibility of free participation in the course, we received thirteen serious applicants from several European countries, such as France, Italy, the Czech Republic or Poland, with B1+ level language skills or higher.

⁷ www.iscolang.upol.cz

During the course the professional handover of the group between the teachers was crucial. The Czech teacher handed over the group to the Irish teacher after his/her teaching session (120 minutes), or the Irish teacher to the Czech teacher. Each teacher shared a report on the progress of his/her teaching day. The internal ISCOLANG resource wall (on Padlet.com), where each teacher could consult in detail the materials of his/her colleague, was also very important. All lessons focused on conversational topics close to this age group, such as Social Media, Fake News, Cultural and National Identity, Humour, Volunteering, etc.

Unfortunately, not everyone was able to participate consistently for the entire duration of the two-week course. This is due to participant choice and perhaps caused by the specifics of the age group, especially by the chosen term. In future projects we would schedule activities to occur during the school year to better serve this demographic group. It became clear that for many candidates and participants it was ultimately more appealing to enjoy the last days of summer before an early return to school, though they considered the course certainly more fun than official courses at school. However, those who stayed until the end were very enthusiastic about the course and were able to effectively improve their language level, which was also proven by their final testing interviews. Graduates of the course particularly appreciated the expansion of their vocabulary and especially the improvement in the confidence and spontaneity of their spoken English.

The project achieved all the set goals, cemented the cooperation between two language institutions from abroad, and created ideas for future joint projects. All could happen thanks to the possibility of using the aforementioned Erasmus+ Small-scale Partnerships, which seems to be very suitable for university language centres.

Oldřich Břenek

Author

PhDr. Oldřich Břenek, Ph.D., e-mail: oldrich.breněk@upol.cz, Language Centre of the Faculty of Arts, Palacký University Olomouc

Oldřich Břenek studied German and Ukrainian Philology at the Faculty of Arts at Palacký University in Olomouc and completed his doctoral degree in German language there too. He is currently the Language Centre Director and teaches German and tourism. Oldřich Břenek has also been a tour guide for Austrian and German tourists for more than 20 years.