Chapter 6

Constructionism in Action within European eTwinning Projects

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ABSTRACT

The European eTwinning programme, as part of the Lifelong Learning action has reached thousands of schools in Europe and beyond. It becomes a cultural trend in education where various theoretical grounds, managerial ideas, and practical solutions meet. Thus, in this chapter, eTwinning is presented as a practical collaborative implementation of ICT tools in education. Furthermore, an attempt to theorize it as an emerging trend, which combines communicative approaches to language learning, is made, including constructivist ideas – both social and cognitive, followed by constructionism as the key background concepts. A reference to other concepts, such as European Key Competences for Lifelong Learning and the feminist angle is made to contextualize the situation in schools. The conceptual framework is linked with the school practice in the ICT-based learning environment within the eTwinning programme. Further description, case studies, and evaluation of the results will be presented.

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INTRODUCTION

eTwinning programme launched in 2004 in Europe as a practical solution aims at providing a safe environment for cooperation between schools from various countries. Teachers and schools are supported to find partners – at least one from a different country. Having agreed on the type, duration, on the content of collaboration they register a project in the eTwinning database. Since then they are able to use the eTwinning portal to store and exchange project materials, as well as communicate using emails, chats and blogs. The partners may use an ICT infrastructure that is available for them, for example Virtual Learning Environments, videoconferencing software, and messengers. Teachers are encouraged to participate in the programme and helped with its ICT infrastructure by National Support Services in each country. The practical side of the programme is the focus of attention of teachers and managers. There are few attempts to theorize the programme’s activities on the ground of pedagogy and methodology of language learning (Zeilder et al. 2007, Uzunboylu 2006, Gajek, Poszytek 2009). That is why, in the article, the programme is investigated from various pedagogical and social perspectives which provides an insight into eTwinning as an educational and cultural trend.

On the one hand, over the last decades, constructivist approaches – both cognitive and social – discussed in pedagogy have been followed by constructionism, based on ICT-enhanced learning. They emphasize the aspects of human development: mental – constructing knowledge in the learner’s head; social – learning by co-operation and discussions with others; and material making material representations of ideas. On the other hand, communicative approaches to language learning concentrate on the active role of the learner, that is learner autonomy (Holec 1981), authenticity of learning activities and materials in meaningful communication acts (Widdowson 1979), as well as communication perceived as an active and collaborative undertaking (Nunan 1992). Furthermore, task-based, project-based, content-based and collaborative language learning have been widely applied in relevant learning contexts. In a particular learning situation, the issue of how to meet the needs of the learner and the requirements of external factors, such as the curriculum and parents’ expectations, is the main concern of the teacher. Within eTwinning action, all the approaches are implemented in a manageable way, accepted by teachers and attractive to learners. The large scale of the programme indicates the need for a study – to observe, identify and describe the development of a new ICT-based learning environment on a large scale at primary and secondary levels. The focus of the study is to describe the characteristic features of the multinational learning environment and evaluate the results, as well as promote examples of good practice.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Anne Gilleran (2010) – Head of the Central Support Service of eTwinning – stated that when European Schoolnet answered the European Commission’s call in 2004, the aim of the programme was perceived as a means of empowering learners through technology. Thus, originally it is rooted in practice rather than in theory. However, whilst looking at the activities from the perspectives of pedagogical and methodological theories, it turns out that various theoretical approaches interrelate in eTwinning projects, despite the fact that teaching practitioners’ focus is on tasks suitable for the needs of their learners, not especially on implementation of any theory. In the process of explaining the phenomenon, two sets of theoretical approaches are of particular interest. The first one is constructionism with its precedents – Vygotskian social constructivism and Piagetian cognitive constructivism. The second set of approaches comes from the methodology of teaching
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