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VIRTUAL ERASMUS AND TASK-BASED ENGLISH FOR LEGAL PURPOSES (ELP): TRIANGULAR COLLABORATION ON CASE STUDIES VIA AN E-LEARNING PLATFORM (BRNO–BRUSSELS–KRAKOW)

Abstract: *Virtual Erasmus* is a collaborative and cross-border legal case study project which brings together law students from different European universities via an e-learning platform. This long-distance trilateral collaboration gives future lawyers the opportunity to engage in a real-world type professional experience: working in international teams on a common task, learning to grasp and appreciate different legal contexts and cultures, while practicing language, legal, and soft skills. Given the format of the project, students gain the scope to employ and further develop their team-work abilities in an intercultural environment. Furthermore, given that they need to organise the bulk of the work themselves, there are strong features of autonomous learning incorporated into the project. Due to the problem-solving nature of the tasks assigned, project participants strengthen their research skills, both individually and collaboratively. Finally, and most importantly, being in direct contact with authentic materials relevant to their discipline, student-participants not only encounter field-specific vocabulary, but also practice productive skills, such as when submitting their project in written form. The added professional benefit lies in the opportunity to share perspectives on how similar legal problems are viewed and dealt with in different jurisdictions across Europe.

The present article outlines the 2017–2018 edition of the project, alongside its pedagogical rationale and reflection on the experience from both teachers' and students' perspectives.

Keywords: ESP, ELP, learner autonomy, IT, task-based teaching, authentic materials, student-centered approach, comparative law

VIRTUAL ERASMUS – PODEJŚCIE ZADANIOWE W NAUCZANIU JĘZYKA ANGIELSKIEGO PRAWNICZEGO (ELP): TRÓJSTRONNA WSPÓŁPRACA NAD STUDIUM PRZYPADKU PRZY WYKORZYSTANIU PLATFORMY E-LEARNINGOWEJ (BRNO–BRUKSELA–KRAKÓW)

Streszczenie: *Virtual Erasmus* to projekt wykorzystujący metodę studium przypadku, który powstał w wyniku współpracy studentów prawa z trzech uniwersytetów europejskich. Tego rodzaju trójstronna współpraca na odległość, a więc przy wykorzystaniu platformy e-learningowej, daje przyszłym prawnikom możliwość zdobycia doświadczenia istotnego w ich późniejszym życiu zawodowym. Biorąc pod uwagę format projektu, trzeba podkreślić, że studenci mają możliwość wykorzystania i rozwijania umiejętności pracy zespołowej w środowisku międzykulturowym i międzynarodowym. Udział w projekcie pozwala również poznać i zrozumieć różne konteksty prawne i kulturowe przy jednoczesnym ćwiczeniu języka, umiejętności miękkich oraz umiejętności potrzebnych w zawodzie prawnika. Ponadto projekt promuje autonomię uczenia się – studenci sami muszą organizować większość swojej pracy, a dzięki przydzielonym zadaniom aktywizującym, których celem jest rozwiązywanie problemów, uczestnicy projektu wzmacniają swoje umiejętności badawcze, zarówno indywidualnie, jak i we współpracy z grupą. Wreszcie, i co najważniejsze, będąc w bezpośrednim kontakcie z autentycznymi materiałami związanymi z ich dyscypliną, uczestnicy projektu nie tylko spotykają się ze słownictwem właściwym dla swojej dziedziny, ale także ćwiczą umiejętności produktywne, na przykład podczas prezentacji swojego projektu w formie pisemnej. Dodatkowa korzyść zawodowa polega na możliwości podzielenia się poglądami na temat tego, jak podobne problemy prawne są postrzegane i rozpatrywane w różnych jurysdykcjach w całej Europie.

W niniejszym artykule przedstawiono projekt zrealizowany w latach 2017–2018, wraz z jego uzasadnieniem pedagogicznym oraz refleksjami na temat doświadczeń z perspektywy zarówno nauczycieli, jak i studentów.

Słowa kluczowe: ESP, ELP, autonomia studenta, IT, podejście zadaniowe, materiały autentyczne, kształcenie ukierunkowane na studenta, prawo porównawcze

Introduction

The *Virtual Erasmus* project was first conceived as a means to motivate students and give them a chance to experience international cooperation within a "needs-based", "collaborative" and "student-centred" framework, while also striving to promote student-led participation.

This is consonant with a key watchword among competitive universities these days, "internationalisation," and a particular demand under European learning frameworks for the broadening of "intercultural" and international experiences for students who do not or cannot benefit from *Erasmus* [or other] mobility schemes, or as a complement to such a mobility programme.

Having met at one of the European Legal English Teachers' Association (www.euleta.org) workshops in 2015, two of the authors (both teachers of English for Legal Purposes) decided it would be beneficial to their teaching area if they sought ways to collaborate. A fruitful teaching-mobility programme at the Jagiellonian

University in 2016 confirmed this and strengthened the belief that we could go further and involve students in our *Erasmus* collaboration. We would do this by exploiting the *Moodle e-learning platform*, not just confining it to our own university online classrooms and course management systems, but to create a space where students from different partner universities could meet each other "virtually," engage in discussion about their courses, and study legal cases through a forum to ultimately form groups and carry out a collaborative assignment together: the idea for a first bilateral "Virtual Erasmus" was born. Pre-existing *Erasmus* agree*á*ments between ULB and MU and between JU and MU meant that the logical next step was to invite our English for Legal Purposes teaching colleagues from Masaryk University to become the third point in the Brno–Brussels–Krakow triangle.

The project that the three universities have been working on, one which is now entering its third year, was initially launched as a "Case study" model in 2011–2012 by David Best at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, Faculty of Law and Criminology. The idea behind the nascent project was to deliver material pertinent to a *Comparative Law* course that students would take subsequently (taught only in English), and to create an assignment element that would match the demand for a needs-based "practical task" as well as offering valuable transferable skills for use in other university courses and indeed for professional life beyond the Law degree.

The "intercultural dimension" of teaching and learning Legal English would be particularly enriching, with the aim being that students coming from different learning contexts in terms of the "old" and "new" EU – Belgium, on the one hand, and the Czech Republic and Poland, on the other – would share their different educational experiences while, added to this, comparing and contrasting their knowledge and insights into different variations on the Civil Law legal culture. We were certain that this added value would bolster the needs-based orientation of the project.

Theory behind the *Virtual Erasmus* project

Projects of this nature have often been described as "maxi-tasks," meaning that they can be carried out over the course of a full semester or longer: ours lasted between four and five months in both editions, 2016–2017 and 2017–2018, running between November and March. Such "maxi-tasks" may constitute the main element of instruction to a foreign language class or may complement a more traditional way of teaching (Nunan, 2006: 135). Task-based language teaching represents the realisation of the philosophy of Communicative Language Teaching, in which language is seen as a "tool for communication." Such an approach to language, together with different communicative needs, led to the emergence of ESP (Nunan, 2006: 7).

The project we launched derives pedagogically from the task-based approach while also subscribing to the notion of experiential learning, thus taking the learner's immediate personal experience as the point of departure for the learning experience

(Nunan, 2006: 12). Learner-centred, task-based language teaching aims to encourage self-directed rather than teacher-directed learning, to make learners feel more autonomous and responsible for the learning process, to encourage cooperative learning, to promote intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation, to teach learners social and communication skills, and to emphasise the process itself rather than the product (Kohonen, 1992: 31-32). Our "Case study" model for a task-based learning assignment appeared to tick all such boxes:

1. Develops students' team-working skills and abilities,
2. Encourages students to go about autonomous learning and deep investigation of their subject,
3. Urges students to solve problems encountered in research/analysis collectively/collaboratively,
4. Gives students the opportunity to come into contact/explore authentic, relevant material pertaining to their field of study,
5. Exposes students to field-specific terminology and structures; urges systematic registering of new vocabulary in glossaries,
6. Accustoms students to reading and researching material directly in their discipline (attentive reader = good lawyer),
7. Gives students the opportunity to contact and dialogue with experienced practitioners in their field,
8. Trains students in research and writing-up skills using systems uniformly used in legal drafting in English,
9. Gives a solid grounding and transferable skills in essay/summary-writing techniques, editing/drafting skills, academic style,
10. Urges students to widen their "reading" across different genres of text and media: academic, legal, journalistic, correspondence, blog, video, advertising, podcasts.

The steps taken to set the Virtual Erasmus project in motion

Before starting the project, we had to analyse students' basic needs: what students wanted the language for, what they like to learn about, how they aimed to benefit from the tasks assigned. Having carried out such a needs analysis, we decided on making the tasks "real-life" or authentic, practical, relevant and serving as a vehicle to promote multiple skills, both "hard" and "soft."

At the Jagiellonian University, students are offered a general course in English with elements of legal language, based mostly on books for Legal English. The idea of international and intercultural cooperation that would incorporate both enhancement of language skills and broadening professional knowledge and language promised to be a great opportunity to use a new method to teach ESP. Additionally, it turned out to be an exciting challenge that ambitious students were ready

to take on. What is more, it proved to be a novel approach that brought benefits for all the parties involved.

Initiatives of this kind have been emerging in different parts of Europe and indeed across the world: quite a few cross-faculty projects can be found which are perhaps farther-reaching in geographical and disciplinary terms. In this context, our trilateral collaboration – more focused in substance and specialism – evolved spontaneously from an Erasmus Teaching Mobility partnership with the specific objective of involving our respective undergraduate classes of English-for-Law students. A triangular collaboration with Masaryk University Language Centre in the last academic year proves that the scope for further enlargement of such a scheme is unlimited.

In the French-speaking world this type of activity is referred to as "*télécollaboration*" and described as "on-line intercultural interaction and collaboration," with three varying objectives in mind: (1) advance preparation of students for physical mobility projects, (2) internationalisation of the university, (3) enhancement of soft skills, IT skills, and autonomous learning. Typical tools used are Skype, social media, e-mail, telephone, file-sharing, video, photos, and blogs. Students are usually given a "guided departure," but they then follow whatever course the interaction takes (see www.unicollaboration.org).

In our case, the objectives were more refined, and the framework and guidance provided more structured than typical *télécollaboration* projects, which often have an "anything goes" approach with the basic aim of getting students to network and communicate on every day topics.

Essentially, we set up five stages, or sections, for the *Virtual Erasmus Case Study* assignment:

→ **Section 1. "Introduce yourself"**: students sign up to the project, identify themselves in a brief bio-profile posted on an open forum for all "Virtual Erasmus" participants, saying where they come from and their motivation for joining the project; they attach a photo and/or video of themselves.

→ **Section 2. "Choose your group"**: students browse other candidates' profiles and, on this basis, select and assign themselves to a group, which automatically closes once the maximum number is reached. To enable smooth formation of groups, the "choose your group" section was developed in two stages, opened first to the Brussels students, to make sure their quota was reached, then closed, and then to the Krakow and Masaryk students, to complete the process. As teachers, we wanted to ensure a balanced distribution of different types of students, hence each group was composed of 2 ULB students + 2 JU students in the first edition of the project, and 2 ULB + 2 JU + 2 MU or 2 ULB + 1 JU + 1 MU in the most recent edition. The range of nationalities distributed over the three groups included Belgian (both French- and Flemish-speaking), Czech, French-Canadian, Polish, Ukrainian, and Bulgarian

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and Spanish (considering the presence of two "Erasmus-Incoming" students in the first edition's Brussels cohort).

→ **Section 3. "Group Work Forum"**: students contribute to an open forum hosting questions and queries, discussion, suggestions and prompts, and ideas about the preliminary stages of the group work. Initially students were quite active in the forum, but this activity diminished as they connected with each other via Skype and Facebook and thus went outside the Moodle platform (which is something we had predicted).

→ **Section 4. "Shared pages"**: essentially a user-generated *wiki* which students may use to start drafting their report using shared documents; funnily enough, students opted not to use this facility and reverted to "familiar" Google docs instead – this was entirely up to them and no problem for us since their final version would be submitted as a Word doc at a later stage via the Moodle platform.

→ **Section 5. "Virtual Erasmus Case Study Final Version"**: students submit the final version of their assignment; it is possible for coordinators to evaluate and grade work via the platform but we decided to revert to old-fashioned means (downloading the documents and working with Track Changes) since in each university we were evaluating the projects using slightly different criteria due to differences in the university calendar and years of study of the participants (though a marking grid for all three coordinators to base their corrections on was initially developed at ULB).

To start out, the students were thus assigned the following task:

→   Choose a **recent judgement** (post-2000) from an EN-speaking or International jurisdiction (ECtHR, UK or US Supreme Court, ICC, or other International Courts, etc.) and present it in the form of a written **Case study**, with details about the: 1. **case**, 2. **facts**, 3. **procedural history**, 4. **legal issues**, 5. **ruling** and 6. **Reasoning**.

→ Carry out some degree of **research/reading** about the **legal issue** as it has been analysed in **doctrine**, in **case law**, and in the **media**; integrate this into the report, as well as some personal **moral and ethical reflections**.

→ Engage in some analysis from a **Comparative Law** perspective through a brief **comparison with** a related case from their **own jurisdiction**, looking not only at **facts and decisions**, but also [cultural and] **legislative-methodological differences and similarities**.

> → Finally, **contact and engage** in some form of **correspondence** – in English – with an **actor in the case** (any level of **legal practitioner or scholar**) **or a commentator** on the case (**journalist, academic, blogger**, etc.; via e-mail/Skype/phone/letter/social media, etc.).

As can be seen, the final stage of preparation of the project (which required correspondence) was aimed at students testing their English in the "real world," their ability to self-initiate and their problem-solving skills, their knowledge of the law and how it applies to the case in question, and even their familiarity with the common law or other legal systems. Additionally, throughout the drafting of their report, students had to conform to stringent editing/report-writing guidelines, with an emphasis on producing systematic notes and references, glossary, bibliography, and supporting documents. More than a simple term paper, therefore, the final product could thus be perceived as a portfolio of a year's learning outcomes, rather than a one-off module essay.

Our students found the project very stimulating not only in terms of the scope for legal language development, but also thanks to the possibility for improving their communication skills. The positive dimension they emphasised most in their feedback was having the opportunity to use language in a more authentic setting. Moreover, they liked the idea of comparing legal systems internationally, which they would not have been able to do in a typical mono-cultural classroom setting. What group members slightly regretted, however, was not having the opportunity to meet each other [physically as opposed to "virtually"] and present the project together in the groups in which they had been working. Furthermore, the platform proved to be somewhat difficult to navigate (this went for the teachers' experience of facilitating the project too), thus prompting them to move their correspondence to Facebook and their shared files to Google Docs.

Conclusion

The "Virtual Erasmus/Case Study" project model in our situation was geared towards teaching/learning *English for Legal Purposes* but it is unquestionably pertinent and exportable to other areas of language teaching since it deals with:

- **Modern approaches & methods used in teaching ELP/ESP**: Virtual Erasmus seeks to optimise student-teacher adoption of up-to-the-minute learner-centred pedagogical [including IT] tools/methods,
- **Role of authentic materials**: projects are based on ECtHR, SCOTUS, ICC, ICJ, and other international judgements; students access pertinent legislation, expert opinion, media reporting,
- **Role of ELP/ESP teacher → towards Learner Autonomy**: participants have full autonomy to decide on subject matter, methods of gathering data,

materials, media; teachers = facilitators, advisors, scaffolding-providers; technical and knowledge-based support,

- **Impact of IT on teaching & learning ELP/ESP**: interaction, Q/A with teachers-students and online chat/forum, content preparation, correspondence with third parties, project submission, via all available means (hub on Moodle, then: Facebook, Google Docs, TodaysMeet, Skype, WhatsApp),
- **Intercultural dimension of teaching and learning ELP/ESP**: different learning contexts, "old" v "new" EU (Belgium, Czech Republic, Poland); different legal systems, methods and interpretation of the terms [hence concepts and methods] of the law; different education models and administrative structures; based on needs-analysis and positively impacts end-user needs awareness; new challenges; enriching student-teacher experience; gives a hands-on introduction to Comparative Law.
- To conclude, here are some of our students' own comments:
- Participating in this project was an amazing experience for every member of our group, since it is the first time any of us actually had to work with foreign legislation and jurisdictions.
- This project definitely broadened our horizons and allowed us to take a look into a whole new legal world.
- It was also an interesting experience, as we got to do research using materials that we do not come across every day, and we will surely find it very useful in our future careers. As the world is developing quickly, the human rights issue is requiring more and more attention every day. This is a significant problem that should never be ignored in the developed world. [This group's project consisted of a study of a potential violation of ECHR Article 3 in relation to life sentences and the right to parole or review in the UK]
- This project was a good "catalyst" for us to start actively taking interest in this issue.
- The fact that we got to cooperate in international teams was a contribution to our language knowledge and usage as well.
- Apart from all this, we also got to know very nice people from other countries,
- and we will definitely stay in contact with each other.

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