

# **ENHANCING LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES THROUGH VOLUNTEERING, ICT USAGE AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN LOCAL GOVERNMENT, UNIVERSITIES AND SCHOOLS**

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## **Abstract**

Multiculturalism and the need for learning foreign languages is becoming a very important part of globalization. This is one of the reasons why learning foreign languages is becoming a more and more important part of education.

The model of collaboration between local government, universities and elementary schools from the United Kingdom and Croatia show positive results in enhancing motivation for learning English as a foreign language. This project was designed as a volunteering project in which volunteers help elementary school children in gathering verbal and oral communication skills as well as raising motivation for learning a foreign language.

Collaboration with the English partners was made by usage of the information and communication technology and through mobilities. All information was available on alfresco share platforms.

Eleven volunteers participated in the first phase of this project. This number was increased to 40 volunteers after a period of one year. They helped 75 elementary school children, aged 8-12, in the process of learning English as a foreign language. Collecting data of the project results was made via a survey. The survey was designed as a Lickert scale, conducted within three groups of respondents: elementary school students, volunteers and teachers of English language. The elements of estimates were motivation, verbal and written communication skills, activity and attendances.

The results of teacher's assessments showed a slight improvement in motivation and language skills. Volunteers reported that elementary school children were happy about their arrival and with working together. Elementary school students liked the volunteers, they also liked the way how they are taught and communicated.

Examples of good practice between the Croatian and English partners were exchanged through conferences and on-line collaboration. The international accreditation from the European voluntary service is part of the dissemination of the project results. Local media supported the project. The results have been published in a printed brochure and also

used on-line materials. The post project activities are planned as a part of similar volunteering projects in local communities as well as on the international level.

## **1 Introduction:**

### **a) Intercommunity Learning Project.**

The intercommunity project is designed with the main aim to increase the motivation for learning foreign languages in a multicultural environment and to prepare pupils for elementary schools for further education. This project includes volunteers, mostly university students, but also citizens. Volunteering in the real environment of a local school is becoming very important part of the volunteers' future work experience. Information disseminated through the media is an effective communication channel which provides a good impact for popularization of the volunteering concept in both the local and international environments.

### **b) Definition of volunteerism and Croatia's Law of volunteerism**

There is no legal definition of the term „volunteerism“ (Inter-Parliamentary Union, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and UN Volunteers. Volunteerism and Legislation: A Guidance Note (2004). In different countries different definitions of volunteerism and volunteer are accepted. Definitions depend on the circumstances, traditions and culture of the country. Definitions of the term volunteerism should be adapted to local social and cultural values but it is important that a framework law on volunteerism provide the most comprehensive and flexible definitions possible for volunteers and voluntary activity. Definitions must include the participation of all men and women who freely offer their time, work and skills, rather than goods, money or facilities, without compulsion of any kind or by law. Croatia's new Law on volunteering definition includes all of these important elements.

Croatia's Law on Volunteering (Inter-Parliamentary Union, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and UN Volunteers. Volunteerism and Legislation: A Guidance Note (2004) was enacted in May 2007. The aim of developing this law was to remove legal barriers to volunteering. The Law includes common elements for law of volunteering as a definition of a volunteer, definition of what types of organizations qualify as hosts under the law, what types of volunteerism are subject to regulation and the apportionment of rights and responsibilities between the volunteer and host.

Under Croatian law “a volunteer is an individual who, by free choice, offers his or her time, work and skills, occasionally or on a regular basis, without expectation of compensation, other than reimbursement of reasonable expenses and subsistence allowance necessary for the accomplishment of his or her assignments as a volunteer, for the public benefit, individually or within the framework of informal or officially

registered non-governmental non-profit organizations or national or international public entities” (Volunteering law, 58/07, Zagreb, 18. May 2007).

Croatia’s Law on Volunteering explicitly prohibits exploitation of volunteering, and specifies that volunteering must not replace work carried out by employees. It prohibits use of volunteers in order to gain or increase profits. The law also prohibits volunteering lasting more than 40 hours per week for a period of six months.

The Law accords volunteers the rights to a volunteering certificate, adequate training, expert assistance and support during the volunteer work, reimbursement of agreed expenses, safe working conditions, familiarity with any dangers associated with the work, and protective equipment needed for particular work. It regulates organized or formal volunteering based on a volunteering contract between a volunteer and a host.

A volunteer is obliged to carry out his or her work consistent with the instructions of the host, to maintain the confidentiality of the host’s information, and to refuse any volunteer work that is not in accordance with the law. Volunteers also have an obligation to warn the host if carrying out an instruction that may cause damage to the volunteer, host, or any beneficiary of the work, and cannot be held liable for any resulting damage if such warning was provided (Shea & Hadzi-Miceva, 2008).

The Law includes two features not commonly found in other volunteer laws (Ethical Codex of Volunteering, 2008; Hadzi-Miceva, 2007). The Law establishes a National Board for Development of Volunteering. The Board is charged with suggesting means to promote volunteering and improve the position of volunteers in society and recommending regulations governing volunteers. The Law also includes a Code of Ethics for Volunteering enacted in May 2008 (Ethical Codex of Volunteering, 2008). The Code is intended to regulate the conduct of volunteers, hosts, and beneficiaries. It includes principles of volunteerism and ethical standards.

### **c) The role of Social media:**

Using Social Media today is a normal part of our everyday life, but using social media for communication in this project was something new. On the project “Inter Community Learning – Basic Skills” the social media tool Facebook is used for easier communication with volunteers.

At the beginning of the project, the main communication channel was electronic mail and all important information has been delivered to the volunteers via e-mail, but we had a lot of young volunteers. For them it wasn't interesting to share information through e-mails because usually they get all interesting information via social media tools, e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Google+. So the project team decided to try sharing information through Facebook. Younger volunteers had much better reactions, but also the other volunteers and project staff really quickly get used to Facebook communication and, after that, all information was shared through a created Facebook group. The result of that was, in one way, a better and more personal communication with volunteers, they started to answer more quickly on the last minute changes in the schedule and they started to share

useful information between themselves. Facebook gave us a new approach to communications and made it easier to pursue the project

## **2. Evaluation methodology**

To check the activities results and outcomes, three questionnaires specially designed for the purpose of this project were used. These questionnaires are: English Teachers' Evaluation, Volunteers' Evaluation and Pupils' Evaluation. Teachers' and Volunteers' questionnaires include 4 equal tasks: assessment of pupils' changes of motivation, success in verbal and written expression and activities resulting from the initial state on the scale from 1 to 5. These were the elements according to which teachers assessed pupils in the mandatory English language course and volunteers assessed them in extra classes when helping them. The third questionnaire Pupils' Evaluation was used to explore the pupils' reaction to the volunteers and about learning English with them.

A database was created to enable the entering, processing and use of this data. Considering the nature of this data, heterogeneity and the size of the respondents' samples, the use of complex statistical procedures was neither justified nor reasonable. Therefore, the data was processed by determining percentages of individual categories of answers. Even though both teachers and volunteers assessed analogue elements as a part of their respective questionnaires, comparison of these elements using statistical procedures to identify the significance of differences (or similarities) is not justified because they relate to different situations: conventional classes (the mandatory English language course ) and assistance with learning (extra classes in which volunteers helped pupils).

Two evaluations were done - during the school year 2011/2012 and 2012/2013, and both were conducted on the same way – by estimation of effects/results on the scale from 1 to 5. The results are presented in the following chapters.

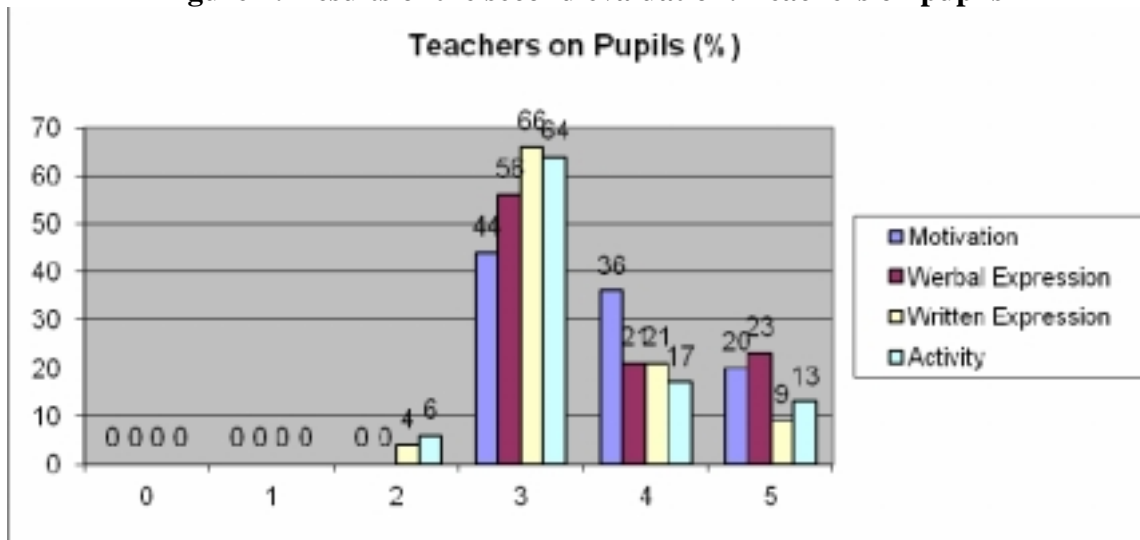
## **3. Evaluations' results**

In the first evaluation (the school year 2011/2012) 3 English teachers, 75 pupils, and 11 volunteers were involved, while in the second evaluation (the school year 2012/2013) there were 3 English teachers, 70 pupils, and 9 volunteers involved.

### **a) Teachers' estimates regarding to the pupils achievement and motivation**

During the first evaluation, 29% of pupil's teachers did not notice any changes in motivation for learning English. A slight increase of motivation was noticed in the majority of pupils, 61%, and significant increase was noticed in 9% of pupils.

**Figure 1: Results of the second evaluation: Teachers on pupils**



According to teachers' assessments, verbal expression skills remained at the same level in 57% pupils, one third experienced a slight increase and in 10% pupils a considerable increase in the level of expression was noticed.

The same changes, with slightly different numbers were noticed with verbal expression skills: in 77% of pupils they remained at the same level, a slight increase was noticed in 17% of pupils and skills were considerably increased in 4% of pupils. In the case of assessment of activities, the results are similar to those of motivation: about one third of pupils do not show any changes, over half of pupils showed a slight increase and 8% of pupils became significantly more active. Teachers point out that pupils like talking about working with volunteers, that they like the volunteers and the activities they do.

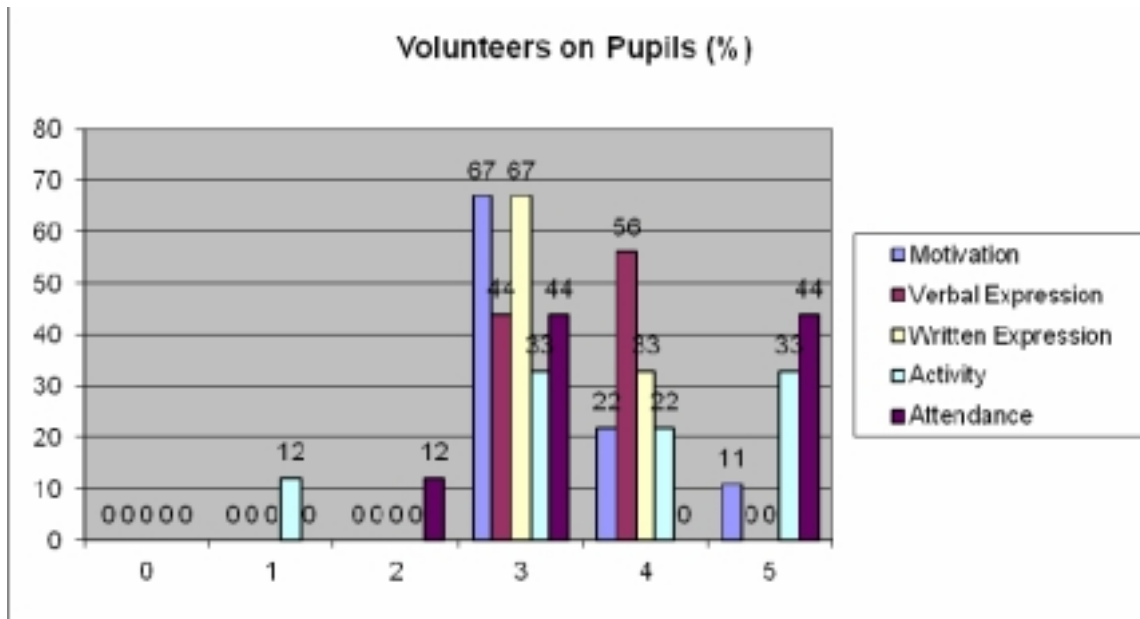
The results of teacher assessment showed a slight improvement of language skills in pupils who worked with volunteers. However, it should be taken into consideration that activities were brief and that a large number of pupils who participated in this project have been learning English for many years and that their 'deficits' are more expressed. Encouraging and ensuring an added value to volunteering with pupils increases their motivation to learn English and increases class activity, which are all changes that ensure further progress.

In the second evaluation more than half of teacher evaluations were at level 3 - "equal"; they did not estimate that there had been a positive change. About 40 % of evaluations were estimated at level 4 - "slightly increased" and 5 - "significantly increased". The greatest positive changes were visible in the verbal expression of pupils in a classroom and their motivation (Figure 1).

#### **b) Volunteers estimates linked to Pupils motivation and skills**

In the first evaluation, half of those volunteers participating noticed significantly higher motivation than at the beginning of their work together, with one quarter of them it was slightly higher and 20% of pupils remained unchanged. Loss of motivation and withdrawal resulted in only a small number of pupils, 3%, which for this type of population is a significant success.

**Figure 2: Results of the second evaluation: Volunteers on pupils**



In activities led by volunteers 54% of pupils improved their verbal communication skills a little, 25% improved considerably and about 20% of those remaining in the system kept the same level of skills. In the case of written expression skills, according to assessments made by volunteers, 63% of respondents achieved a little improvement, 14% achieved significant improvement and 22% did not show any changes. Active participation of students in English classes held by volunteers was significantly increased by 58% of students, slightly increased by 22%, while 12% kept the same level of activity. The majority of pupils who started attending activities held by volunteers carried on and are generally regular attendees.

The comments made by volunteers pointed out that children were happy about their arrival and their work together. Some children are direct in their communication whilst a few felt intimidated. Volunteers often noticed that some pupils needed continuous encouragement and appraisal to get involved. The volunteers are encouraged and highly motivated by the pupils, especially girls who, although soon aware of limitations

resulting from their living conditions, showed determination and a persistence to succeed nevertheless. According to volunteers' comments, some of them will receive individual treatment and their target will be to ensure their possible progress. Assessments of volunteers state more positive improvement than the assessments of teachers. This is understandable because volunteers monitored different work and always outside of classes. This type of work always gives more opportunities for entertainment, play and fulfillment of pupil's wishes, adjustments of levels and there are no formal results which have to be measured.

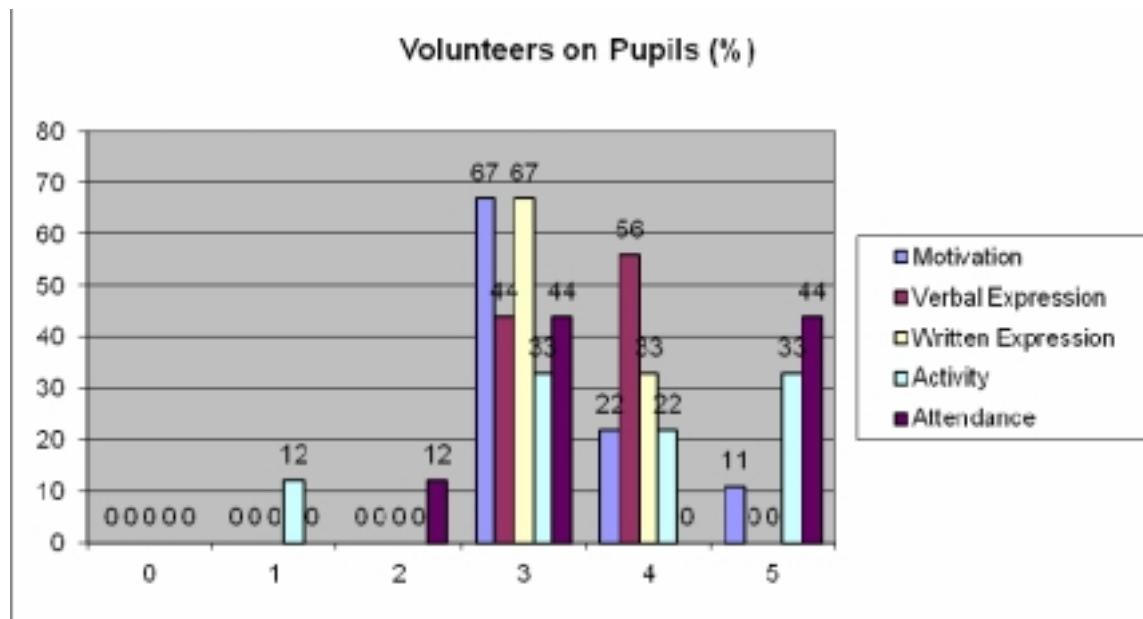
In the second evaluation (Figure 2), volunteers estimate higher enhancements and improvements in verbal expression and activity.

### c) Pupils estimates regarding to Volunteers peer tutoring

Pupils assessed all elements in the questionnaire on volunteers and learning English outside classes ('How do you like learning English'? 'How do you like socializing'? How interesting is it'? 'Is this type of learning more interesting than learning in classes?'), mostly with the two highest scale categories: about one third of assessments included 'I like it' and about two thirds included 'I like it a lot' answers. The number of answers in the negative part of the scale was negligible. Work with volunteers can be best described by the high 86% of pupils involved in the project who want to continue these activities.

Pupils like volunteers personally '... they are good, they play with us, they help us, and they are nice'... They also like the way volunteers work. They especially appreciate that volunteers are ready to talk to them about their problems or the issues that interest pupils, and that they show interest in them. Pupils were especially excited about the teaching material that volunteers prepared for them and games they played: 'Hangman!', 'Guess Who?', 'Memory', guessing games, exercise sheets etc...

**Figure 3: Results of the second evaluation: Pupils on volunteers**



In the second evaluation (Figure 3), pupils' estimates are mainly at the level 4 and 5, which means that they really liked learning English with volunteers, they liked their company, and that they found the volunteers' way of working more interesting than the regular English language teaching/learning. **88 % of pupils** would like to continue to learn English with volunteers.

To conclude, the volunteer work with the pupils emphasized strengthening motivation, self-confidence, creating a positive emotional experience and fresh attitudes toward learning, and according to the pupils evaluations these changes/aims were achieved. Given the initial level of the pupils involved, for visible changes/advancements in the field of knowledge and skills, harder work during a longer period is needed.

#### **4 Conclusions**

Collaboration between Varazdin County, primary school and the University is established during activates of Comenius project. Stronger links between the local community and local government have been achieved. The concept of volunteering is becoming more popular. Volunteering experiences help volunteers to build their own self confidence, to develop their communication skills and to become more competent in the future labor market. School pupils are more motivated to learn English as a foreign language. International communication competences and also could be useful for their further education and use in the future labor market.

Some of the project results can also be used by other stake holders – such as the Comenius Brochure

Brochure (Arnall at all, 2013) and cartoon dictionary (On line Cartoon Croatian English Dictionary/ Intercommunity Learning Project, 2013)). The Volunteering system which was used in project in the Petrijanec School and at the similar institutions in UK can be used as a peer tutoring model in other cases.

#### **Further researches:**

One of the project results is the collaboration established between UK and Croatian institutions and this network can be used for other international research. Plans already exist to continue this partnership and to expand it to similar educational institutions in other regions as well to continue the process of evaluating the success in raising motivation for leaning foreign languages among primary school children.

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