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PUTTING INTERNATIONALISATION IN PRACTICE. A BLENDED INTENSIVE PROGRAMME ON MULTILINGUALISM AND INTERCOMPREHENSION

Nikolina Tsvetkova

The author aims to present an international learning event – the result of a number of active international partnerships of the university hosting it – against the background of several important developments in European higher education (HE) policy. More specifically, these are internationalisation processes and the need to support a language policy valuing multilingualism, which underly the intensified teacher and learning mobility we are now witnessing at the European level. Enhanced academic mobility and cooperation is highlighted in the European Strategy for Universities (European Commission, 2022) as important factors in promoting synergies among the diverse higher education institutions across the European Union. According to this strategy, universities “have a unique position at the crossroads of education, research, innovation, serving society and economy”. (European Commission, 2022, p. 1).

International cooperation at the higher education level in the EU

In De Wit’s view, expressed in his 1999 article Changing Rationales for the Internationalisation of Higher Education, international cooperation and exchange should not be seen merely as the result of national and international bodies’ policies. Universities themselves are active in devising strategies to bring the international perspective to the fore. (De Wit, 1999). Later, he adds that internationalisation has become mainstream and points out the role that the Erasmus Programme has played in this process over the years, calling it a “a driver of European internationalization” (De Wit, 2013, p. 19). Originally

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established in 1987 to promote cross-border collaboration of universities and higher education institutions through structured mobility of students, the programme (now Erasmus+) currently brings together various transnational cooperation and mobility schemes and helps EU universities to collaborate on a global scale. (Erasmus to Erasmus+, https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/about-erasmus/history-funding-and-future#intro).

While the limitations of the very nature of the current text do not allow delving deep into the theoretical background underlying the concrete educational event in focus here, it is important to mention one of the models of “international universities” introduced by Jane Knight (2015) – the Classic model, where a university has multiple international partners and activities. Be it bilateral or network-based, collaborative initiatives “span a diversity of academic and management initiatives, including academic student/scholar mobility, joint program development and delivery, collaborative research projects, benchmarking, professional development”. (Knight, 2015, p. 110). It is in the framework of this type of international cooperation that the education event discussed here is implemented, what is more, it is the result of several active and sustainable multilateral partnerships.

Promoting Intercomprehension and Multilingualism in Higher Education – a Blended Intensive Programme

The abbreviation BIP stands for Blended intensive programme which is implemented under the Erasmus+ programme as a novel form of learning mobility. What is special about BIPs is not only that they are hybrid learning formats, meaning that face-to-face learning (5 days) is combined with a compulsory online element to facilitate “collaborative online learning exchange and teamwork” (Erasmus+ Programme Guide, 2024, p. 52) but they are also open to students, teachers and administrative staff. Although quite new as a form of mobility (as opposed to the traditional structured mobility for teachers and students), BIPs are already attracting researchers’ attention. Some authors are interested in the international added value of BIPs (Gögele & Kletzenbauer, 2023; Perfölz &; López-Varela, 2022). Others discuss the innovation potential of BIPs focusing on a particular programme in a particular study field combining it with a study of participants’ perceptions (Grindei et. al, 2023; Frampton et al., 2023; Piščikienė et al., 2023)

The Promoting Intercomprehension and Multilingualism BIP was implemented over the course of November 2023 and Sofia University St. Kliment
Ohridski in Bulgaria hosted its face-to-face part. Conceptually, the BIP was devised as an autumn school under the multilateral international cooperation endeavour ANIME², presided by the University of Strasbourg (France) and which Sofia University is a member of. This particular BIP concept was developed by Sofia University teachers and was supported by the representatives of the EU universities, which are members of ANIME.

**Multilingualism and Intercomprehension as the focus of the blended intensive programme**

According to the New Strategy for Multilingualism, the richness and diversity of languages and cultures in the European Union are an asset, hence the EU has a clear multilingualism policy which aims to encourage language learning and promoting linguistic diversity in society, to promote a healthy multilingual economy, and to give citizens access to European Union legislation, procedures and information in their own languages (European Commission, 2005). The European language policy has at its heart the fundamental principle of accepting the equality of all languages and aims to create conditions for acquiring one’s mother tongue plus two other community languages, to promote intercultural communication (between multilingual individuals), to recognise language competences as key to the knowledge society and to recognise the results of lifelong learning (with a view to mastering languages) (Stoicheva, 2006, p. 78).

Recognising the importance of the European language policy in promoting large-scale pan-European multilingualism, some researchers are optimistic and consider it realistic for European citizens to achieve a level of proficiency in several languages. For example, despite the undeniably dominant English used as a means of communication in many spheres in Europe, and as a means of instruction at the tertiary level some authors argue that work should be done to develop a holistic language education policy that includes both global English and linguistic diversity (Vez, 2009).

Multilingualism is a horizontal priority for the Erasmus+ Programme and various tools are envisaged in order to facilitate mobility and “participation in European education” (Erasmus+ Programme Guide, 2024, p. 12). In this regard it is also important to help not only students, but also teachers and administrators become aware of certain useful approaches to and techniques in communicating

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while planning or participating in educational events abroad or at home. Intercomprehension, which has been developed by different European teams for over 25 years now, allows people to effectively communicate with each other even when each of them speaks his or her first language. It naturally occurs in situations that require communication in different languages, helps people to acquire partial linguistic competence and intercomprehension as the process of co-constructing meaning in intercultural/interlinguistic contexts (Capucho, 2011).

The Promoting Intercomprehension and Multilingualism (BIP) aims to enhance participants’ understanding of multilingualism and intercomprehension, to provide participants with linguistic tools necessary to access the meaning of simple messages written in Bulgarian and transfer this experience to accessing other less widely spoken languages with the help of either English or French, to create conditions to reflect on and discuss the value of multilingualism and intercomprehension in a personal, professional and academic context and, last but not least, to foster intercultural communication and mutual understanding.

The BIP goes over the following steps starting with some online activities, continuing with face-to-face lectures and workshops and small-group field projects:

- raising awareness of one’s own linguistic background and language biography and other participants’;
- gaining theoretical knowledge related to internationalisation of higher education, multilingualism, plurilingual competence and intercomprehension;
- linguistic landscaping;
- learning some basic Bulgarian;
- teaching the other participants their own language.

Overall, a balance between theory and practice was sought with a preference for experiential learning opportunities.

Sustainable partnerships

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the BIP was successful thanks to all participants, who were representatives of institutions Sofia University has active multilateral cooperation with. Eleven participants were from the University of Strasbourg (thanks to the ANIME network). Five students were from Matej Bel University in Banska Bystrica, Slovakia, with which Sofia University has active collaboration through the CEEPUS Network European History, Politics, Culture
and Memory and the Jean Monnet European Identity, Culture, Exchanges and Multilingualism – EUROMEC. Eight participants represented the Transform4Europe Alliance with 7 from Vytautas Magnus University in Lithuania and 1 from Saarland University in Germany. One participant represented an institution which Sofia University has long-standing bilateral cooperation with Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1 in France.

BIPs should be designed so as to promote the trans-national cooperation among all represented institutions, however, this particular BIP was attended by people of various ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including Ukrainian students and staff currently based at the participating institutions.

The trainers were from Sofia University, the Catholic University of Portugal, also a member of the Transform4Europe Alliance, and the University of Trnava, Slovakia. The host institution was represented not only by the academics who acted as teachers on the BIP, but also European Studies bachelor and master students, PhDs and specialists from the International Relations Office.

This variety of participants in terms of their professional roles also proves beneficial in studying the BIP focus themes as well as in enhancing intercultural skills and acquiring skills in and awareness of several European languages – not only English and French, Spanish and Portuguese but also Bulgarian, Slovak, Ukrainian, and Lithuanian.

By way of conclusion

Finally, let us finish by using the words of the participants in the Promoting Intercomprehension and Multilingualism blended intensive programme. They perceive it as “an inspiring experience” because “it reinforces European values and diminishes prejudices, while encouraging and reinforcing professional and personal links among participants”; as “a great opportunity to acquire the basic knowledge of intercomprehension and put it into practice”, “to better understand the rich heritage of Bulgarian language and culture, and to significantly extend (...) teaching methods in multi-cultural, multi-linguistic settings”.

As the participants conclude, “overall... we got to understand the importance of the cultural background of a person, and how this influences their way of thinking and the way they express themselves; but at the same time, how languages are cross-cutting no matter how different they are: how they connect us as humans”.

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