Recommended website

BE-CuLT

http://www.becult.org

Basic E-cultural and Linguistic Training for the Hotel and Catering Sector

Theoretical Background of the Becult Project
The BE-CuLT website draws on a variety of different theories and approaches. The basic underlying principles are Computer Assisted Language Learning, Content and Language Integrated Learning, Autonomous Learning, and the promotion of intercultural competence. In the following, these principles are elaborated; as well as a discussion of other theoretical issues and their impact on the development of the website and organizational aspects of program application.

Applications
The webtool was designed within the framework of an EU Leonardo program to enhance the mobility of young people in Europe in combination with professional vocational training. Its purpose is to help prepare young people to work in the hotel and gastronomy sector.

The webtool can be used flexibly, as varied starting points and individual countries’ and institutions’ differences in their ability to integrate the tool were taken into account from the very beginning. There is no need of a trained language-teacher in order to work with the webtool; a cooking teacher, a staff manager, a social-worker, a senior colleague, etc. can take the role of a tutor. BE-CuLT can be used in tutored group learning situations as well as in independent work. BE-CuLT can be utilized not only to prepare students for foreign placements, but for a variety of other uses as well. For example, restaurants or hotels can use the webtool to train their employees to interact with guests from foreign countries.

Target Group Requirements
The program was developed in close connection with institutions which train, send and host trainees. A needs analysis, including questionnaires and discussions, was carried out during the development of the learning program. The opinions of representatives of both sending and hosting organizations from the countries involved were gathered, as well as reports by young people who went abroad and used parts of the website.
The target group – young people in professional vocational training – often has limited personal and social experience. Therefore, there is a need to build up competencies which can enable them to participate successfully in mobilization programs. Due to the young people's lack of experience outside their social circle, often in combination with educational deficits, having already experienced failure in the regular systems, and family (or personal) problems, they often lack adequate social skills. Transferred to a workplace abroad, they often need language skills and culture integrated learning on the most basic level: greeting, answering questions, finding places, etc. particularly when the use of a foreign language is involved. BE-CuLT is designed to bridge these cultural gaps.

One problem pointed out by teachers, trainers and employers is that the young people often have very low self esteem and lack the social skills necessary to interact at the workplace.

Another point mentioned was some trainees' lack of motivation and staying power. From the trainees' point of view, this was partly confirmed. When the students who had been abroad were asked about the problems they encountered during their stay, a considerable number of them answered that they felt insecure, homesick, or missed their girl- or boyfriend. These difficulties show that it is important to provide young people with means of communication and to give them support during their stay abroad.

Learning Environment - Technical and organizational issues

The needs analysis has shown that the amount of hours needed for the program itself as well as for the qualification of staff carrying out the preparation is quite diverse. This makes it difficult to set up minimum standards. In most cases, a preparation time of about 20 hours is necessary.

As one aim of BE-CuLT is that young people be able to prepare themselves without a tutor at their side, the trainees should be given enough time to work with the website on their own and use the tool.

Trainers named the internet as the second most-used medium after books when preparing for a work placement abroad. This is a good precondition for the tool. The interviews with students also showed that they appreciate having a webtool to support them during their stay abroad. The trainees were open-minded towards an internet-tool like BE-CuLT.

Preparation time also depends heavily on the level of language learning proficiency, the length of the stay abroad and differences or similarities between the mother tongue and the target language. Both students and teachers found two weeks to be the absolute minimum preparation time. BE-CuLT can be a good learning tool to support the trainees' independent learning process before and during their stay abroad. As to the equipment needed, access to a PC and to the internet is a minimum standard that all agreed can be fulfilled by every country.

It is important to remember however, that the use of the BeCult Website should be seen as one method of preparation, and may be used together with other lingual and cultural trainings.

The teachers and tutors should also be aware of the fact that the highest effect on the young learner concerning the lingual and intercultural competences is to be found in the placement situation itself and that the tool is designed to be an adequate tool preparing and supporting the stay abroad.

E-Learning and Computer-Assisted Language Learning

Computer-assisted language learning is an approach to language teaching and learning where the use of a computer as an aid to the presentation, reinforcement and assessment of material to be learned, normally consisting of an interactive element.

For professions relating to restaurant service, kitchen, and hotel reception, Be-CuLT presents trainees with typical situations represented in video clips, with young people playing the roles. There are also exercises and games in which the target language must be used. By these means, young people can become acquainted with the
language. By watching videos, doing exercises and gaming, they learn dialogues related to their profession and can get an impression of the working culture of the host country.

**Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)**

The term Content and Language Integrated Learning is used to describe a situation in which a subject (here cooking, serving, and reception in the hotel and catering sectors) is taught in a foreign language (for example Dutch). CLIL is now widely-used to teach languages.

In ‘pure’ language classrooms, learners go through the often difficult process of sorting out sounds, structures, grammar or vocabulary, the use of the target language often stays artificial. The language classroom is essential for the learner to understand the ‘nuts and bolts’ of language - the architectural plans. But there is rarely enough time in the classroom for the language teacher to go beyond this essential part of the learning process. Language is ’learned’ rather than ‘acquired’ (see Krashen 1983). Based on the assumption that successful language learning is connected to communication combined with experience and real-life situations, the BE-CuLT website aims to enhance language learning for professional contexts and situations. (Marsh & Langé, Using Languages to Learn and Learning to Use Languages.)

The BE-CuLT website provides an opportunity to also learn a language while learning about concrete working situations and getting general information on other countries and their cultures.

**Situational and Professional Learning**

The professional area is divided into three sections: hotel reception, kitchen and restaurant service. Each of these sections contains five or six different situations that BE-CuLT participants can use to prepare themselves before leaving for abroad. These situations were chosen during an expert workshop in Berlin and reflect the different working cultures in each of the participating countries. Within these sections, trainees can become acquainted with professional terminology through the use of Content and Language Integrated Learning. Alongside video clips with subtitles, various exercises and games are used to teach technical and professional terms. Videos and games are utilized for Content and Language Integrated Learning based on the assumption that they will help motivate trainees to learn the language of the host country.

The program is aimed specifically at teaching professional vocabulary and idioms in the above-named sectors. This is reflected not only by an emphasis on terminology, but on the vocabulary used most in each area, for example nouns may be predominately foods or verbs may have to do with eating.

**Foreign Language Competencies**

The teachers and trainers interviewed deemed the trainees' foreign language competencies to be of utmost importance. One third indicated that language competence should be the main factor in the decision whether a placement abroad should take place or not. The companies interviewed also rated linguistic preparation as necessary for a successful placement. The trainees should be trained in listening and understanding the spoken language of the host country and should have some knowledge of professional terminology and idioms.

From the point of view of the trainees, almost all indicated that linguistic preparation in advance is “very important” or “important”. Most of the trainees interviewed who had already been abroad indicated that they encountered language-related problems during their stay abroad. They had difficulties understanding both technical terms and the instructions of their colleagues as well as communicating in general.

Although knowing the language was rated high, the primary target group is not as interested in grammar as in using the language; nor do A1/A2 levels of language competence necessitate extensive grammatical expertise of the language studied. Therefore, teaching should concentrate on the themes presented in the material, rather than stick to explaining grammatical structure in a traditional fashion.
The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF) is an internationally approved tool for measuring language competence. With the introduction of the CEF, a unified system for describing foreign language ability was created. Similar to other language learning materials, BE-CuLT is structured to reflect the CEF levels of competence.

CEF divides language competence into a total of 6 levels:

- A (Basic User): A1 Breakthrough Level, A2 Waystage Level
- B (Independent User): B1 Threshold Level, B2 Vantage Level
- C (Proficient User): C1 Effective Operational Proficiency Level, C2 Mastery Level

The so-called “‘can do’ descriptions” of these levels concentrate not on faults and shortcomings, but rather look at development and growth of competencies.

The description of a speaker of A1 level in the Common European Framework is as follows:

*Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.*

The description of the A2 level is as follows:

*Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.*

Since BE-CuLT is aimed at introducing languages to absolute beginners and learners with basic knowledge, levels A1 and A2 are of particular significance. However, in order to cope with the needs of realistic settings meant to mirror the workplace abroad, some fancy tightrope walking is necessary. On the one hand, the program’s dialogues must be formulated to realistically reflect that which students can expect to hear in the unfamiliar training situation abroad. On the other hand, the dialogues must be easy enough for young trainees to understand and follow. Otherwise, chances increase that learners may become unmotivated and frustrated. Therefore, some dialogues may deviate from level A1 or A2. Factors such as the similarity between mother tongue and target language must also be considered and may result in different levels of difficulty, particularly for comprehension tasks. A 1:1 translation into every language is not aimed for; the differences between e.g. French and Finnish, or the similarities between e.g. Dutch and German make it undesirable to remain on one (e.g. A1) level when translating the dialogues.

Autonomous Learning and the Teachers’ role

“Learner autonomy” is a key word in foreign language education. It has transformed practices in the language classroom, giving rise to facilities students can access by themselves. The student has been placed at the center of attention in teaching languages. Learner autonomy is also considered to be fundamental to life-long learning skills.

There are many definitions of learner autonomy, each of which underlines different components. Learner autonomy has been considered as a personal human trait, a political measure, and/or an educational measure. Some of the most well known definitions in the current literature are:
• “Autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning” (Henri Holec)
• “Autonomy is essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning” (David Little).

Learner autonomy as understood by BE-CuLT is encouraged not only in the individual and untutored use of the program, but also in tutored language groups. In groups, it is also possible to select a variety of exercises, allow different learning tempos and support autonomy in the learning process.

In experiential learning, the role of the trainer shifts from the traditional teacher to a tutor; a co-explorer and facilitator of learning. The importance of appropriate feedback to a successful learning experience is also taken into account; e-learning offers a wide variety of methods of giving feedback.

Cultural Differences and Intercultural Competence

As has been mentioned above, BE-CuLT also focuses on different cultural aspects in order to explain cultural and/or social differences within the partner countries. Besides social, professional and language skills, some knowledge of the host country's culture, particularly the working culture, is important.

Culture is understood in this project in a broader sense. It is defined as an orientation system that influences thinking, feeling, recognizing and acting (see Hofstede 2005, Trompenaar 1997 and Kotthoff/Spencer-Oatey 2007). To have knowledge of this orientation system and its symbols (e.g. language, values, rules, rituals, taboos or lifestyles) means to feel safe and to feel a sense of belonging to a group. Before going abroad and working in another cultural context, the trainees should have some knowledge about the host country. They should for example know about some 'dos and don'ts', about some manners and rituals. BE-CuLT tries to give some basic information, and strives, despite the small amount of information imparted, to avoid enforcing existing stereotypes and prejudices.

BE-CuLT also contains a cultural area which provides general information about the countries. The website includes videos which point out cultural and social singularities in each country, in order to make differences as well as the relativity of perspective more understandable for each student.

In the cultural area, students can find helpful information about the host country and its culture. This area explores different cultural dimensions to explain cultural or social differences within the partner countries. The dimensions the project deemed important are: different concepts / understandings of time, communication styles, power structures, individualism / collectivism.

The needs analysis revealed the need for cultural preparation. Trainers from different hotels or restaurants appreciate it when the trainees know something about the differences in the working culture; e.g. the working hours and the different understanding of time, different standards of hygiene, security rules or different levels of hierarchy. Therefore, BE-CuLT also provides this information within the professional area by means of videos and games.

For BE-CuLT, intercultural competencies have a relationship to social, personal, methodological and professional competencies:

• Social competencies are interpersonal competence and the ability to communicate,
• Personal competencies are open mindedness, the willingness to learn, a tolerance of uncertainty and/or frustration,
• Methodological competencies are problem-solving and decision-making skills,
• Professional competence is knowledge about other cultures (in the broadest sense) (see also 'The Development of National Educational Standards. An Expertise').

By including these cultural dimensions, students are better able to understand their host country.
Communication as an Element of the Webtool

In computer assisted learning, learning and communication can be combined. BE-CuLT includes a zone for communication where the trainees have the possibility of communicating with their tutors, families or friends by chat or written messages in case of problems or homesickness. Another aim is to build contact between trainees of different countries so that they may exchange experiences and other information of interest. This area will also provide a download and upload function where e.g. teachers and trainers can upload materials for their students so that they have less difficulty catching up after returning. This helps to train the trainees’ reflective (e.g. reading and understanding) and productive (e.g. writing) language competencies. By using the communication platform and staying in contact with trainees from other countries, they will read and write and automatically train the competencies described above.

Last but not least, students can find useful links on the website. There are several links for further information on the host countries and cultures. One link will lead to the predecessor project of BE-CuLT: Easy2 (www.easy2.org), a learning tool to study English as a foreign language. In contrast to BE-CuLT, Easy2 is not specialized in a certain branch and is designed to train general language skills. Additionally, there will be links leading to different homepages from each country, to the EU and to other homepages.

Literature and further Reading


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Introducing Becult

The Becult website is a web-based tool for the cultural, linguistic and professional support of trainees in the hotel and catering sector leaving for a work experience abroad. The tool includes a video based language program, exercises and games, cultural information, communicational tools as well as other things. It is designed for special professional contexts – hotel reception, kitchen and restaurant service. It prepares young people in professional vocational training for a work experience abroad and provides linguistic and cultural support. Finland, France, Germany, Italy and The Netherlands are represented on the website with their languages and cultures.

The learning program is designed as a preparation and a guidance for a job-related stay abroad and as a help for continued learning and as a communication tool after the placement. It provides an insight into general cultural aspects as well as gastronomy and work-related particularities and allows the learner to become familiar with the language in the professional context by the use of appealing video clips, games and exercises, thus strengthening the learners’ motivation.

In contrast to common foreign language training programs, this is not an introduction into grammar and language structure. Instead, the program was particularly designed to provide a possibility to become acquainted with the sound of the language, with common vocabulary and phrases to develop strategies to understand, and to get information about culture and professional contexts in the target country. This means that BeCult should be used in combination with other language learning methods.

This project was funded by the European Commission within the Leonardo da Vinci program. The project duration was 1 year, from October 2005 to September 2007. The following information is taken from the project website and addresses the learner him or herself.

Login and register

Learners require a user account to log into the system. The full features of the BeCult website are only available to registered users.
Choosing a language and learning level

After logging in, the learners start by entering the multimedia learning platform. They then select the language they wish to learn by clicking on one of the flags. A new language can be selected at anytime.

After choosing a language learners can select between two difficulty levels according to their experiences and aims: Beginner or Advanced.

The areas

There are three professional language learning areas on the Becult website. These areas allow learners to experience typical working situations in different cultural settings:

“The hotel area” contains learning materials about typical situations at a hotel reception. “The kitchen area” contains learning materials about typical situations in a restaurant kitchen. “The service area” contains learning materials about typical situations in an a-la-carte restaurant. In the “cultural area” learners can additionally watch videos showing features of the culture they are soon to learn about.

The learning videos

The Becult website includes a number of videos showing typical working situations in different languages. If the learner wishes to compare the videos with their own language they can select the same video in their language from a list. All the videos have subtitles, making them easier to follow. In addition, the whole dialogue can also be accessed as a text in the “Video scripts” section while watching the video. Learners may at all times switch to the glossary in order to translate a selected word into any of the languages.

In the Videoscript section, learners can access the scripts for the videos in all six languages. The scripts contain all the spoken dialogues in text format. It is possible to simultaneously read them while watching the videos or print them for later use. The English script was used as a blueprint for all the other languages.
The learning exercises

In the Exercises area learners can train and test their skills since the different exercises are related to the videos in the selected language and professional area, for example, French Cuisine. There are different types of exercises such as “gap-fill” or “matching”, etc. Because the the exercises on the BeCult website are bundled into SCORM-packages the results are saved, making it possible for the learner or the tutor to monitor the student’s learning progress. After working with a given exercise the degree of completion will be shown on the screen. All the exercises were created using the “Hot Potatoes” software.

Image 6. Exercises in a SCORM-mode

The learning games

Playing a game means action. Learners can learn and test their skills, trying to act in an appropriate way in a given situation in the selected language. In this section learners need to make choices. By making the right choices, learners move forward in the game and become acquainted with specific language and culture at the same time. The games are related in content to the learning videos. They were designed using the Half-Baked software called “Quandaries”.

Image 7. Maze game

European Language Portfolio (ELP)

The website also includes a link to the official European Language Portfolio website of the Council of Europe. The language portfolio is a document with which learners can monitor and reflect on their language learning and cultural experiences. The portfolio contains a language passport, a language biography and a language dossier. Its aims and functions are to motivate learners, as well as to provide a record of their linguistic and cultural skills.

Glossaries

The link entitled Words gives access to the list of the most useful expressions and typically used phrases under a given topic. They are displayed side by side in several languages allowing learners to compare these and find similarities in different languages. Additionally, there is a Search box which allows the learner to find a given translation instantly. This function is particularly useful when watching the videos and/or reading the scripts, completing exercises or playing the learning games.

Image 8. Glossary
Communication tools
There are two possibilities to communicate directly with a tutor or fellow learners before, during and after a placement abroad. Learners can either use the chat function or write an e-mail message. These functions encourage learner interaction and stimulate a sense of non-isolation by becoming aware that there are other learners pursuing the same goals.

Downloads
Learners can store the video sequences in Mp4-format onto an ipod and/or multimedia mobile phone.

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