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## eTwinning Projects in the Humanities: Personal and professional benefits for future teachers

*Proyectos eTwinning en Humanidades: Beneficios personales y profesionales para los futuros docentes*

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### **Abstract**

The use of eTwinning in initial teacher education (ITE) is intended to provide student teachers with opportunities that benefit them on a professional and personal level. These benefits for teachers and their students are confirmed by several studies in the European context. This chapter provides insights into student teachers' opinions on the benefits reported by teachers involved in eTwinning projects. The study was conducted with student teachers from Italy, Spain and Croatia who participated in the international eTwinning project *ITE: Educ@ting for sustainability, from universities to classes* in the academic year 2002/2023. The results of the study confirm that student teachers have a positive opinion of eTwinning and are aware of both the personal and professional benefits of participating in an eTwinning project.

*Keywords:* eTwinning, initial teacher education (ITE), interdisciplinary international projects, professional and personal benefits

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## Resumen

El uso de eTwinning en la formación inicial del profesorado (FIP) tiene como objetivo proporcionar a los futuros docentes oportunidades que les beneficien a nivel profesional y personal. Estos beneficios para los profesores y sus alumnos están confirmados por varios estudios en el contexto europeo. Este capítulo proporciona información sobre las opiniones de los futuros docentes sobre los beneficios reportados por los docentes involucrados en proyectos eTwinning. El estudio se llevó a cabo con estudiantes de magisterio de Italia, España y Croacia que participaron en el proyecto internacional eTwinning *ITE: Educ@ting para la sostenibilidad, de las universidades a las clases* en el año académico 2002/2023. Los resultados del estudio confirman que los estudiantes de magisterio tienen una opinión positiva de eTwinning y son conscientes de los beneficios tanto personales como profesionales de participar en un proyecto eTwinning.

*Palabras clave:* eTwinning, formación inicial del profesorado (FIP), proyectos internacionales interdisciplinarios, beneficios profesionales y personales.

## Introduction

The eTwinning platform was established in 2005 as part of the European Commission's eLearning program. The main goal of this initiative was to build a community of schools in Europe that would allow them to communicate, collaborate, develop projects and ultimately be part of the European educational community. Today, eTwinning is part of ESEP, the European School Education Platform.

The cornerstones of eTwinning projects are the development of intercultural competence and the promotion of the European dimension, the integration of ICT and project-based learning into the teaching-learning process, and the acquisition of foreign language skills in real communication situations. One of the most important contributions of eTwinning projects is that they provide an innovative methodological framework for the acquisition of competencies. Gilleran and Kearney (2014) emphasise the role of eTwinning projects in creating collaborative and multidisciplinary learning environments based on research and new technologies that are particularly conducive to the transversal and simultaneous acquisition of basic competencies. This type of methodology is particularly relevant given the scarcity of holistic approaches to improving interdisciplinarity and the holistic development of students.

Both teachers and students who have participated in eTwinning projects have reportedly shown positive impacts. According to the study by Kearney and Gras-Velázquez (2015), teachers who participated in eTwinning projects noted a wide range of benefits, such as foreign language teaching, using transversal skills in the areas of teamwork, creativity, problem solving and decision-making, competence to implement a project-based approach, teaching in a multicultural or multilingual environment, collaboration with

teachers of other subjects, competence to assess transversal skills, etc. Teachers also noted positive effects of eTwinning on students, especially in terms of increasing student motivation, fostering collaboration between students, improving interpersonal relationships between students, and developing students' learning skills. Nieto Moreno de Diezmas and Ortiz Calero (2017) observe several benefits for students and emphasise the impact of these projects on students' motivation to communicate. The authors attribute this result to the creation of real, meaningful and natural environments for the use of the foreign language that eTwinning projects bring.

In turn, the study by Cassells, Gilleran, Morvan, and Scimeca (2016) found positive opinions from students. According to them, eTwinning helped them appreciate the diversity of European culture, have a different learning experience, grow as a person, develop new skills, and influence their future. Therefore, eTwinning provides unforgettable experiences in students' lives and can be used at any age and educational level.

One of the main advantages of eTwinning is that it can be used not only at the non-university level, but also in initial teacher education (ITE). ETwinning was first introduced in 2012 as a pilot programme for teacher education institutions, and then offered to ITE institutions in 2017. This is a strategy to provide future teachers with basic knowledge about eTwinning and to learn from their own international, intercultural, and project-based teaching and learning experiences. In this way, they can acquire skills and then implement them once they enter the education system as active teachers.

The platform provides the opportunity to connect with partners, disseminate proposals and examples of activities and projects. Among the benefits of having future teachers participate in these ITE programs, students discover and design project-based learning methods, implement multidisciplinary work models, improve their own language skills, learn about and use new digital tools, establish contacts with other European cultures, learn about and exchange practices and materials with teachers from other educational systems, develop professional skills needed in the future such as planning, design and project management, and teamwork, and promote practices such as reflection on their own professional practice.

Although the importance of eTwinning for ITE has been recognized (Huertas-Abril & Muszyńska, 2022), the implementation of eTwinning in higher education is still limited, resulting in a lack of research studies on the impact of eTwinning in ITE environments. Valuable findings have been made on interpersonal skills and international collaboration (Gülbay, 2018), student teachers' perceptions of eTwinning (Paz-Albo & Hervás, 2017), impact on different teaching competencies (Paz-Albo & López, 2017), and the importance of ICT and eTwinning for future mathematics teachers (Dobi Barišić & Moslavac Bičvić, 2022).

Against this background, this paper aims to show the impact of an ITE project on its participants, student teachers from the three countries (Italy, Croatia and Spain) collaborating in the eTwinning project *ITE: Educ@ting for sustainability, from universities to classes*.

The idea for this eTwinning project arose from the need to develop networked activities between universities and schools and the opportunity to provide future teachers with a tool for professional development, with particular attention to collaborative teaching, methodological scaffolding and comparison between student teachers and pre-primary and primary teachers. The project was organized and conducted through the ESEP platform between the universities from Italy, Spain and Croatia and pre-primary and primary schools from Italy, Romania and Poland. The goal of this ITE eTwinning project was creating an “educational bridge” between schools and universities: student teachers planned micro learning units based on content and language integrated learning approach (CLIL) and the teachers, on the other end, implemented the activities in the classes with their pupils. Schools in this project promoted education for sustainable development by bringing pupils closer to knowledge and respect for natural contexts and their constituent elements, aligning themselves with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development with the help of the CLIL methodology. Student teachers in the project studied the topics for various levels of pre-primary and primary, the vehicular language being English, in hope of not only bridging the gap between theory and practice, but also enriching and innovating studies offered at the universities through eTwinning.

## Methodology

The aim of this study was to investigate student teachers’ opinions regarding the impact of participating in an eTwinning project on their personal and professional levels. In addition, we were interested in student teachers’ opinions on the commonly cited benefits of eTwinning for teachers and whether they had experienced them themselves.

The predicted answer (research hypothesis) was that student teachers involved in eTwinning projects:

- H1. Recognize the benefits of eTwinning for their professional development;
- H2. Recognize the benefits of eTwinning on a personal level;
- H3. Recognize the general benefits of eTwinning.

## *Instrument*

To achieve the research objective, a questionnaire was developed from the available resources and research findings: a questionnaire on the impact of eTwinning on teachers’ professional issues (Crişan, 2013), questionnaires on the effects of eTwinning on teachers’ personal development (Acar & Peker, 2021), and a set of open-ended questions about eTwinning (Huertas-Abril & Muszyńska, 2022). The questionnaire was compiled and modified to meet the needs of this research and the specific target group, which consisted of student teachers actively participating in the eTwinning project *ITE: Educ@ting for sustainability, from universities to classes*.

The questionnaire, divided into four main sections, included questions on participants' general information (age, year of current study, study programme and university), opinions on the impact of the eTwinning project on their personal and professional development, and opinions on eTwinning in general, with a series of open-ended questions about their experiences with eTwinning and possible future collaborations.

The questionnaire was distributed to groups of students once they had completed their assignments within the eTwinning project during the 2022/2023 school year. The survey was conducted online using Google Forms.

## *Participants*

A total of 125 responses (N=125) were collected from student teachers who participated in the eTwinning project *ITE: Educ@ting for sustainability, from universities to classes*. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The majority of respondents (59.2%) were studying in Italy at the University of Basilicata (26 participants) or at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart (46 participants), while 12 respondents (9.6%) were studying in Spain (University of Castilla-La Mancha) and 41 (32.8%) in Croatia (Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb). Participants were between 19 and 50 years old and were in different years of studies (from 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> year) of different teacher education programmes: preschool education, primary education, primary education and English, and primary education and German. Before participating in this eTwinning project, 50 participants (40%) had never heard of eTwinning.

## **Results**

### *Professional development*

The part of the questionnaire related to the professional development of student teachers consisted of 14 statements. Respondents had to rate the extent to which each area of their professional development was developed after participating in eTwinning on the following scale: to a great extent, to a medium extent, to a small extent, not developed at all, I cannot decide. Statements included ICT, foreign language learning, project-based teaching, cooperation with foreign students, cooperation with peers, etc.

In all fourteen items, respondents overwhelmingly indicate that their professional competencies have developed as a result of the eTwinning project (Table 1). In half of the statements (statements 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 13, and 14), more than 50% of the participants indicated that their competencies were developed to a great extent. Respondents indicated that their competency of selecting activities that add value to the educational situation was developed to a high degree (73 respondents; 58.4%), and they are more open to international collaborations (69; 55.2%) and working with peers (71; 56.8%). In

addition, respondents are able to pay more attention to quality of the projects (65; 52%), place more importance on collaborating with teachers in the school or in other schools (68; 54.4%), have a better idea of participating in joint educational projects (66; 52.8%), and have a new perspective on the role of educational partners in the teaching profession (66; 52.8%).

Table 1. Opinions on the impact of eTwinning on development of professional competences

Competences developed	To a great extent	To a medium extent	To a small extent	Not at all	I cannot assess
1 A better perspective on the responsibilities and your contribution in your own professional development	54 (43.2 %)	58 (46.4 %)	11 (8.8 %)	1 (0.8 %)	1 (0.8 %)
2 Greater attention to quality of the projects you make	<b>65</b> <b>(52 %)</b>	47 (37.6 %)	11 (8.8 %)	0	2 (1.6 %)
3 More attention paid to the importance of pedagogical principles in creating and conducting learning activities	62 (49.6 %)	46 (36.8 %)	15 (12 %)	0	2 (1.6 %)
4 More emphasis on collaborative activities with teachers in school or in other schools	<b>68</b> <b>(54.4 %)</b>	45 (36 %)	8 (6.4 %)	1 (0.8 %)	3 (2.4 %)
5 Better view of the participation in collaborative educational projects	<b>66</b> <b>(52.8 %)</b>	46 (36.8 %)	10 (8 %)	1 (0.8 %)	2 (1.6 %)
6 A new perspective on the role of education partners in your profession	<b>66</b> <b>(52.8 %)</b>	44 (35.2 %)	11 (8.8 %)	2 (1.6 %)	2 (1.6 %)
7 Your cooperation with student teachers from other countries for cultural and linguistic exchange	56 (44.8 %)	42 (33.6 %)	19 (15.2 %)	<b>5</b> <b>(4 %)</b>	3 (2.4 %)
8 Choosing activities that add value to educational situations that you design for your students	<b>73</b> <b>(58.4 %)</b>	43 (34.4 %)	9 (7.2 %)	0	0
9 Using the results of the assessment activities to improve teaching	61 (48.8 %)	47 (37.6 %)	13 (10.4 %)	4 (3.2 %)	0
10 More confidence in new technologies	57 (45.6 %)	46 (36.8 %)	20 (16 %)	2 (1.6 %)	0
11 More confidence in using a foreign language	61 (48.8 %)	52 (41.6 %)	8 (6.4 %)	1 (0.8 %)	3 (2.4 %)
12 Better use of ICT for professional development	56 (44.8 %)	51 (40.8 %)	13 (10.4 %)	3 (2.4 %)	2 (1.6 %)
13 More open to international collaboration	<b>69</b> <b>(55.2 %)</b>	40 (32 %)	9 (7.2 %)	4 (3.2 %)	3 (2.4 %)
14 More open to collaboration with my peers	<b>71</b> <b>(56.8 %)</b>	40 (32 %)	7 (5.6 %)	<b>5</b> <b>(4 %)</b>	2 (1.6 %)

Interestingly, the largest percentage of respondents claiming that their competencies were not developed at all (5 respondents, 4%) was in two cases (items 7 and 14), i.e., student teachers indicated that their collaboration with student teachers from other countries for cultural and linguistic exchange and openness to collaboration with peers was not developed at all in this project.

### *Personal development*

The next part of the survey collected participants' opinions on nine areas of their personal development. The questions covered self-confidence, communication, helping and sharing, openness to developing new friendships, use of a foreign language, leadership skills, sense of belonging, productivity, and creativity and new ideas.

Table 2. Opinions on the impact of eTwinning on personal development

	Higher	The same as before	Lower
1 Self-confidence	<b>61</b> <b>(48.8 %)</b>	54 (43.2 %)	10 (8 %)
2 Communication	<b>78</b> <b>(62.4 %)</b>	37 (29.6 %)	10 (8 %)
3 Helping and sharing	<b>88</b> <b>(70.4 %)</b>	25 (20 %)	12 (9.6 %)
4 New friendships	54 (43.2 %)	59 (47.2 %)	12 (9.6 %)
5 Foreign languages	<b>77</b> <b>(61.6 %)</b>	41 (32.8 %)	7 (5.6 %)
6 Leadership	43 (34.4. %)	<b>67</b> <b>(53.6 %)</b>	<b>15</b> <b>(12 %)</b>
7 Belonging	52 (41.6 %)	57 (45.6 %)	<b>16</b> <b>(12.8 %)</b>
8 Productivity	<b>77</b> <b>(61.6 %)</b>	39 (31.2 %)	9 (7.2 %)
9 Creativity and new ideas	<b>103</b> <b>(82.4 %)</b>	18 (14.4 %)	4 (3.2 %)

The majority of respondents indicated that their personal skills had developed in five of nine areas (Table 2). While communication and productivity levels were higher for 62.4% (78) and 61.6% (77) of participants, respectively, helping and sharing were on a higher level for 70.4% (88) of participants. The highest percentage of respondents (103; 82.4%) reported that their level of creativity and new ideas was greater than before the eTwinning project. In addition, 61 participants (48.8%) reported that their self-confidence had increased.

On the other hand, the leadership skills of 67 respondents (53.6%) are the same as before the project, with 15 respondents (12%) reporting that their leadership skills are lower than before the project. The sense of belonging is also lower than before the project for 16 respondents (12.8%).

### *General benefits*

The last section of the survey consisted of two parts. In the first part, participants had to indicate a level of agreement (strongly agree, partially agree, partially disagree, and strongly disagree) with statements about the general benefits of eTwinning. The second part consisted of four open-ended questions.

Table 3. Opinions on general benefits of eTwinning

	Strongly agree	Partially agree	Partially disagree	Strongly disagree
1 Better knowledge of other educational systems	55 (44 %)	62 (49.6 %)	6 (4.8 %)	2 (1.6 %)
2 Strengthening the sense of belonging to a professional community	56 (44.8 %)	61 (48.8 %)	6 (4.8 %)	2 (1.6 %)
3 Supporting the new roles of student teachers in the context of new, technology assisted education	<b>78</b> <b>(62.4 %)</b>	41 (32.8 %)	4 (3.2 %)	2 (1.6 %)
4 Linking the formal curriculum with interesting and motivating teaching activities	<b>65</b> <b>(52 %)</b>	54 (43.2 %)	6 (4.8 %)	0
5 Makes teacher's work more interesting for both teachers and students	<b>85</b> <b>(68 %)</b>	35 (28 %)	4 (3.2 %)	1 (0.8 %)
6 Creating a safe learning environment	<b>72</b> <b>(57.6 %)</b>	48 (38.4 %)	4 (3.2 %)	1 (0.8 %)
7 Creating a creative learning environment	<b>85</b> <b>(68 %)</b>	38 (30.4 %)	1 (0.8 %)	1 (0.8 %)
8 Improving intercultural communication	<b>81</b> <b>(64.8 %)</b>	36 (28.8 %)	5 (4 %)	<b>3</b> <b>(2.4 %)</b>

Respondents' opinions were positive, as they mostly agreed (strongly or partially) with all eight statements about the benefits of eTwinning (Table 3). More than 80 participants strongly agreed that eTwinning makes teachers' work more interesting for both teachers and students (85; 68%), creates a creative learning environment (85; 68%), and improves intercultural communication (81; 64.8%), followed by items such as supporting the new roles of student teachers in the context of new technology-enhanced education (78; 62.4%), linking the formal curriculum to interesting and motivating classroom activities (65; 52%), and creating a safe learning environment (72; 57.6%).



In the first open-ended question, students were asked what they liked most about the eTwinning projects. All participants answered this question. Their answers can be grouped into six categories: working with others in a team (18; 14.4%), communicating with others and meeting new people (13; 10.4%), international collaboration (40; 32%), working and learning creatively (20; 16%), learning foreign languages and learning about other cultures (13; 10.4%), and other (e.g., participants liked working on the project activities and the teaching method used in the project; 21; 16.8%).

In response to the second question (“What did you like least about the eTwinning project?”), 71 responses were recorded. The answers were categorized into several groups. The most common response was about communication or lack of communication between students (19 participants), which can be related to participants’ responses about disliking working in a team (8 participants) and organising international meetings (8). While a group of complaints (16) concerned teachers’ instructions, time allocated for the project and other teaching issues, a significant number of respondents (15) pointed out technical problems with the eTwinning platform.

For the next question, we were interested in whether participants would use eTwinning projects in the future and why. Fortunately, 103 respondents (82.4%) answered “yes” and cited foreign language communication, ICT in the classroom, learning about other cultures, innovation and creativity as benefits of eTwinning. Only 5 (4%) respondents answered “No” without providing further explanation, and 17 (13.6%) answered “Maybe”, citing current problems with the platform, the need to learn more about eTwinning, or concerns about the usefulness of the platform in a kindergarten.

In the last open-ended question, participants were asked for comments that may not have been included in the previous questions. Several positive and negative comments were recorded, including advice for better communication between students in the project and appreciation for involvement in the project.

## Discussion

The results of this study offer several insights into student teachers’ opinions on the use of eTwinning and the professional and personal benefits for student teachers. Regarding the area of professional development, student teachers’ opinions are clearly positive, as they perceive a development of their professional competencies through participation in the project. Thus, the first hypothesis of the research was confirmed. Similar to Crişan’s (2013) research findings on teachers’ professional development, respondents place more emphasis on collaborative projects in schools and pay more attention to activities and educational projects that are very important educational objectives in ITE. However, while a considerable number of participants recognized the benefits of international collaboration, communication, and peer collaboration, several student teachers indicated that their competencies in these two areas were not developed at all. To shed light on this phenomenon, we seek a possible explanation for students’ statements in the last section of the questionnaire, in which respondents acknowledged challenges in communicating with their domestic and international peers. Some student teachers complained about a

lack of foreign language skills, uneven workloads, or objective circumstances such as difficulties in organising an online meeting due to the working hours of student teachers. This is largely consistent with previous research by Huertas-Abril and Muszyńska (2022) in which student teachers indicated that communicating and collaborating in English with foreign colleagues can be a problem. Dealing with such questions brings us to the development of transversal skills mentioned in the second part of the study.

In terms of opinions on personal development, the results of the survey were even more positive, thus confirming the second hypothesis that student teachers recognize the benefits of eTwinning on a personal level. This result is in line with a previous study conducted among teachers (Acar & Peker, 2021). Student teachers identified benefits for their confidence, communication, helping and sharing, foreign language skills, productivity, and especially the area of creativity and new ideas. Student teachers also reported that some areas of their personal development were affected by eTwinning, particularly leadership skills and sense of belonging. Not surprisingly, some respondents were unable to develop their leadership skills. Objectively, teamwork can be challenging even without the added layer of international communication, which was the case in this project. Therefore, it is not surprising that some individuals did not have the ability or opportunity to be group leaders or feel that their ideas were not sufficiently respected while working in a group, which can also lead to a sense of not belonging to a particular peer group. Transversal skills such as the ability to work in a group, present one's ideas, plan, be flexible, listen, and cooperate in terms of deliveries and deadlines were tested and experienced by the student teachers participating in the project.

The third hypothesis was also confirmed as student teachers recognize the overall benefits of eTwinning. Despite the potential and objective challenges, student teachers undoubtedly recognize the benefits of eTwinning in ITE. They value the opportunities for international communication and collaboration, as well as learning about other languages and cultures. It is encouraging that more than 80% of student teachers plan to use eTwinning in the future, given the benefits mentioned earlier in this study.

## Conclusion

More than half of European systems face teacher shortages (European Commission, 2012), usually related to STEM subjects (European Executive Agency for Education and Culture, 2013). In addition, teachers face problems related to lack of generic skills and competencies in English.

eTwinning projects in ITE can help prepare future teachers for future challenges by providing useful support to promote a collaborative learning dimension in which students develop not only aspects of communication in a foreign language, but also flexibility, cooperation, peer-to-peer learning, and transversal skills (Calenda, Luzzini, & Soldo, 2022). Moreover, eTwinning projects are usually in English or multilingual. This fact inevitably affects student teachers' foreign language proficiency (most commonly English), which in turn may influence their teaching methodology towards content-based language integrated learning (CLIL) (Leone & Luzzini, 2016).

Because of its characteristics of flexibility, sustainability, openness to innovation and internalization, the “magic” of eTwinning is particularly suitable for training future teachers to work in multicultural contexts, apply innovative methods in everyday teaching, support communication and language learning, work on projects with the active participation of pre-primary and primary students, and develop personalized learning pathways that foster the development of key competences and inclusion.

Despite the challenges the student teachers faced in this project, they recognized the benefits of eTwinning on both personal and professional levels. In future eTwinning projects with student teachers more emphasis should be placed on developing student teachers’ transversal competencies, particularly emotional and social competencies that help student teachers enjoy teamwork and collaboration on multiple levels.

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