

Development And Implementation of an Action Research-Based Blended Learning In-Service Teachers' and Trainers' Course

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Abstract

ISIT („Implementation Strategies for Innovations in Teachers' Professional Development“) builds on a well-evaluated programme for teacher professional development (BaCuLit) with six training modules which all serve the literacy development in the subject area classrooms of secondary schools: Content Area Literacy (CAL). The acronym BaCuLit stands for „Basic Curriculum in Teachers' In-Service Training in Content Area Literacy in Secondary Schools.” Within this program an instructional framework for professional development was developed in cooperation with renowned Content Area Literacy-experts and institutions of teacher professional development from the USA and 7 European countries. This framework consists of 6 modules, closely connecting theory and practice. This programme was translated into 6 national languages (German, Dutch, Portuguese, Romanian, Swedish, Hungarian), put to the test in 7 teacher training institutes (one of them is Kecskemét College Teacher Training Faculty) for the target group, evaluated (formatively) and eventually edited in an optimized final version.

The participants have become qualified as certified BaCuLit trainers through a 3-month blended-learning course and a 1-week international summer school licensing them to offer professional development programmes based on the BaCuLit materials. They commit themselves to document and reflect this „implementation process“ of CAL-elements (or entire BaCuLit courses) in their institution by means of a semi-structured research logbook. An action-research approach will provide the methods to be followed.

Keywords: Content Area Literacy, blended learning course, teacher professional development, action research approach

1 Introduction

The ISIT project addresses two of the crucial needs defined by the Education and Training Benchmarks for 2020 and by the High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (HLGEL 2012):

- a) the problem of low literacy skills in many European countries
- b) the unsatisfying status of teachers' continuous professional development (CPD) in the EU.

Thus ISIT pursues **two goals**:

- a) a specific goal: training 30 teacher educators from 3 European countries in content area literacy (CAL)

b) a general, comparative goal: analysing good examples of how to implement innovations into different national structures of CPD.

The innovative aspect of the project is to effectively combine these two goals.

The project follows a multiplier approach: by training teacher educators (narrow target group) it will reach out to secondary school teachers (second target group) which will have a positive impact on the long-term target group of students with low literacy skills (broadest target group).

ISIT builds upon the results of the Comenius project BaCuLit providing a comprehensive curriculum in CAL for CPD, including course materials and trainer handbooks. ISIT aims at implementing this concept into the CPD structure of Germany, Hungary and Romania, where a total of 30 teacher educators from 25 different training institutions will be made familiar with CAL instruction.

The project follows an action research approach, which means not to separate research from action. Therefore the trainers will analyse together with scientists the steps and obstacles in implementing CAL courses in their institutions. Thus, ISIT intends to explore the general opportunities and obstacles in implementing innovation into teachers CPD in these 3 countries.

A further objective is the dissemination of CAL into 5 other countries: partners from Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, and Portugal will participate gaining comparative insights and providing input from the perspective of their countries.

The ISIT participants:

1. **Coordinator: University of Cologne (UCO)**, Prof. Dr. Christine Garbe, Dr. Andreas Seidler, M.A. Martin Gross
2. Core Partners (Germany, Hungary, Romania):
 - **Germany:** Experts for Continuous Professional Development of Teachers from the Federal State of Hessen
 - **(Hungary:** Hungarian Institute for Educational Research and Development **(HIERD)**, **Budapest,**
 - **Hungary:** Kecskemét College **(KeCo)**, Kecskemét, Prof. Dr. János Steklács, Dr. Ildikó Szabó, Dr. Veronika Szinger
 - **Romania:** „Alexandru Gavra” Teacher Training Center, Arad **(CCD Arad)**,
 - **Romania:** Filocalia Foundation **(FiFo)**, Iasi,
 - **Romania:** Romanian Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Association **(RWCT)**, Cluj-Napoca
3. Associate Partners:
 - **Belgium:** University of Liège **(ULG)**,
 - **Cyprus:** Centre for the Advancement of Research & Development in Educational Technology **(CARDET)**, Nicosia,
 - **Finland:** Jyväskylä University **(JyU)**, Jyväskylä,
 - **Greece:** Aristotle University Thessaloniki **(AUT)**,
 - Portugal:** University of Minho **(UMinho)**, Braga.

2 Scientific background of the project

In contemporary societies, all citizens are faced with increasing challenges to their literacy competences (= proficient reading and writing skills). They are essential for everyday life, learning, work and full participation in society. International literacy assessments (PISA, PIRLS) have shown severe deficits in many European countries. European education policy

therefore addresses the improvement of literacy skills as a key issue, e.g. in the Education and Training Benchmarks for 2020: “By 2020, the share of low-achieving 15-years-old in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%.”

The Final Report from the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy² (HLGEL) emphasizes literacy as a basic competence for social, cultural and economic participation. This report identifies a variety of reasons for low literacy skills and offers a comprehensive action plan to address the problem on the European level. The applicant, Prof. Garbe, coordinated the LLP-project “ADORE – Teaching Adolescent Struggling Readers (www.adore-project.eu), which has become one important resource for HLGEL.

One central issue of HLGEL is to raise the “quality of teaching and learning” and to make all teachers aware that they have to become teachers of reading. The EU literacy experts conclude: “For content area teachers to integrate literacy into their teaching, literacy must be integrated into their education and training – both pre-service and in-service.” Prominently among the “recommendations relating to adolescents” the HLGEL report claims: “Make every teacher a teacher of literacy”.

Up to now in most European countries content area teachers are not prepared for this task: in Initial Teacher Education (=ITE) they study their subject and subject-specific didactic, but not how to deal with “content area literacy” (= CAL). The term “content area literacy” refers to teachers’ competence to deal with reading/writing/learning instruction not only on the elementary level in the language classes, but in all subjects and all school levels. But in most European countries, content area teachers are not trained to fulfill this task.

Until today, mainly mother tongue teachers in elementary schools are prepared to teach reading and writing skills. But this task should be seen as important part of the work of all teachers in all subjects in secondary schools. This is one main results of the ADORE study (www.adore-project.eu), which was carried out by the applicant and 11 partners from other countries. These studies show that up till now there is hardly any qualification of content area teachers in supporting struggling readers and learners - especially in secondary schools. Too many teachers simply assign students to read, to write papers, etc. without ever showing them how to develop and apply these skills.

Focussing on good practice for supporting struggling readers in secondary schools, the ADORE and the BaCuLit projects both identified crucial deficits within the current continuing professional development (CPD) programmes. Even if CPD is now considered a professional duty in 24 countries or regions⁵, all CPD-related studies state the vital role of CPD for providing teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary for their teaching care as well as the remaining need for improvement⁶: in short, „efforts must be increased.” (Eurydice Sept 2011, 11)

Adding to the gap between teachers' needs and the current state of the art in CPD is the precarious situation of the teacher educators: „Teacher educators are too often neglected in policy-making” (Europ. Commission 2012, p. 52)¹. „Their role and profiles vary significantly from country to country and from one teacher group to another” and thus they have very „different levels of commitment and loyalty to Teaching Education”.

This is the innovative approach of the ISIT project: to explore the possibilities of implementing innovations (like CAL) despite the different structures of CPD. It combines the dissemination of new CAL-elements with an action research on examples of successful implementation strategies.

BaCuLit has been designed as a reaction to the problem of low achievers in the EU. “Performance on reading literacy of young people deteriorated in the period to 2006. Most

¹ ETUCE 2008: Teacher Education in Europe, p. 34. http://etuce.homestead.com/Publications2008/ETUCE_PolicyPaper_en_web.pdf

recent data for 2009 show a good improvement which is, however, not sufficient to meet the target for 2010². [1] It means, more effective ways of schooling and instruction have to be developed. In some European countries only mother tongue education in elementary schools serves as reading instruction. On the contrary, the idea of content area reading (reading to learn) and ‘reading across the curriculum’ has to be fostered.

The other main problem is that the ‘selective principle’ within the educational philosophy of some European school systems is hindering the realization of effective support systems for all students. According to BaCuLit philosophy, the idea of the support principle combined with the use of formative assessment in instruction has to be fostered.

For improving instruction in the medium term, in-service teacher education is most necessary and the most effective practices of in-service teacher education need to be tried out. *One-shot activities* or *short scale approaches* have almost no sustainable effect on classroom practice. Teachers’ routines and beliefs are often stronger than new ideas and concepts. Therefore, there is a gap between what teachers know and what they do (‘knowledge-action-gap’).

For overcoming the ‘knowledge-action-gap’ *long-term approaches* are needed that involve coaching teachers continually over a longer time period. Teachers try out in actual school contexts what they learned in the training and form professional learning communities which offer support and foster commitment and accountability.

Blended-Learning approaches seem to be appropriate for teachers’ professional development because time and personal and financial resources are used in an optimal way.

3. Methods and objectives

European reports about the conditions of Teachers’ Professional Development (like TALIS or Eurydice 2011 and 2012) offer valuable data concerning teachers’ professional development in European countries on a general level, which form a reliable frame for orientation, but they do not provide advice for the central question of this project: Which strategies for the *implementation of innovations* are suitable for the respective educational systems? As to this question we need more specific qualitative data which can be obtained best by means of “action research”, which closely links theory and practice according to the principles of “learning by doing”: Action research is conducted in natural (e.g. educational) settings „in an ongoing cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting on change”. Central principles of action research are *not* to separate research from action (change, innovation) and likewise *not* to separate researchers from actors. “Action research is examining one’s own practices through collaborative inquiry, reflection, and dialogue³”. It has been known by many names including participatory research, collaborative inquiry, participatory research, action learning. In a nutshell it means that teachers thoroughly examine their everyday practice, pose problems and try to find solutions to those problems through collaboration, dialogues and reflection. “It is not just about hypothesizing and collecting data. It aims at changing situations; not just interpreting them⁴”.

The project consortium will accompany 30 teacher educators from 25 training institutions (in 3 countries) while they integrate CAL courses (offers) into the existing CPD activities of their institutions.

ISIT based on the assumption that experiences with implementing CAL are valid and helpful also for other kinds of innovation. Thus they can be used by all actors who want to

² www.alinet.eu

³ Nugent et al. 2012, p. 4

⁴ Nugent et al. 2012, p. 6

implement new methods, materials or subject-related focuses into CPD.

Two work stages are planned (identical with Work Package 1 and 2):

- **Implementation: (Training of the trainers):** In every core partner country an Information Day was organized to address the decision makers within teachers' CPD institutions. Measurable Indicator: The Info-days served the aim to invite teacher trainers to a training course in CAL. The Hungarian Info-day took place at HIERD on 23 January 2014, and was attended by highly qualified professionals from HIERD, higher education institutions, research centres, pedagogical institutes.

The training of the trainers took place in a national blended-learning course consisting of 3 months E-learning and one common international summer school.

- **Exploitation:** Partly overlapping with this training course the 30 trainers started planning the integration of CAL elements into the regular programmes and services of their institutions. On the basis of a semi-structured report form they write an implementation logbook documenting the steps they take and the obstacles they face. These logbooks will be analysed and summarized by the national coordinators and discussed on national level (follow-up-meeting) and finally at an international meeting.

The project aims at:

- a specific (pedagogical) objective: the qualification of teacher educators in CAL (on the basis of the BaCuLit model curriculum)

- a more general objective related to education policies: exploring and identifying successful strategies for implementing innovations within CPD.

Specific objective: Establishing CAL in secondary school teachers' professional development. In Germany, Hungary and Romania a total of 30 trainers from ca. 25 different training institutions will be made familiar with the BaCuLit curriculum and its standards. This will enable the trainers to flexibly use CAL elements in their training of teachers in their region. It is supposed that by this multiplier effect about 500 teachers per year will be made familiar with CAL elements and will be encouraged to use them in classroom practice of all disciplines and all school ages. BaCuLit is to be understood as a model of a training programme for teachers; but we are well aware of the fact, that trainers have to adopt it to current requirements, programmes and time frames. Thus implementing a fixed training programme is not an aim, but to train the trainers in flexibly adopting its standards and materials.

General objective: A Comparative Study – based on case studies in different countries - of “Innovation Management” in CPD. The project accompanies 30 trainers and their institutions while they try to implement CAL elements into their regular training programs and services. The according steps and the obstacles will be analyzed in order to come to conclusions about implementation strategies in CPD.

In the ISIT project these strategies are related to the implementation of CAL, but it is assumed that similar strategies could be applied in implementing other innovations. Thus these conclusions will be helpful for all actors in CPD. As a result a Comparative Study of the gained experiences will be presented, accompanied by suggestions for implementing innovation in teacher education processes in the participating countries (in 4 languages: English, German, Hungarian, Romanian, extent about 100 pages).

4. Workplan and Work Packages

Work Package 1, Month 1 – 6: Training of the Trainers: One-day Information Seminar – in each country 15-20 representatives from education authorities and training centres. Topics: (1) Report on the state of international research on reading with regard to CAL, (2)

Discussion of implementation methods on the ground, (3) Invitation to the qualification of trainers.

Training of Trainers via Online Platform (www.itslearning.com), for each (of the 3) country, 10 trainers shall be trained in a blended learning course. Months 3-6: materials and tasks were to be provided via an online platform.

Training of Trainers at an International Summer School: a 5 day international summer school took place, for all teams, including the associate partners, in Germany. Outcome (total): about 30 trained teacher trainers in 3 countries.

Work Package 2, Month 10 – 12 / 5 - 10: Exploitation: Month 5-10: Trainers work out a plan for implementing CAL in the general curriculum of their institutions. Deliverable: implementation logbooks (about 25 on a whole) in the national languages, being summarized by national project leader.

The central topics for the logbooks have been prepared in common report forms worked out by the coordinating team. They consist of questions like:

General information:	
Your name:	
How is in-service teacher training organized in your (federal) state / country?	
Are teachers obliged to take regular CPD? If so, how much? Are there incentives or sanctions to guarantee regular participation in CPD? If so, which ones?	
How is quality control of CPD organized in your country / federal state? (For example: Who is entitled to offer CPD? Which accreditation of courses is required?, etc.)	
Name of institution/s where you currently work:	
Please describe basic features of the institution where you intend to implement CAL courses. [For example: How many trainers work there? How many teachers does your institution train? Which kind of teachers? Which subjects? In which context does your institution work?]	
Which kind of teacher training is offered in your (partner) institution in general: one-shot seminars? Medium or long term courses? (How many hours?)	
Is there any quality control of	

CPD-offers in your institution? If so, please describe: which kind of evaluation takes place as a regular procedure?	
Please describe your professional expertise, background and current position:	
As an individual trainer: In what kind of institutions do you plan to implement the course? For how many teachers?	
Additional remarks:	

Figure 1: ISIT Action Research Tool No. 4, Implementation Logbook for CAL Courses

Each national project group leader writes a report about the implementation process in English. The participants of the Hungarian ISIT course filled in and sent their logbooks to the trainers at Kecskemét College. At this work phase of the project based their feedback the national report is being written. The results of the ISIT participants' dissemination activities are being summarized, analyzed and compared. The final report is to be introduced to and discussed with those most engaged 8 members of the team who have provided the richest and most useful data for the final national report. Their selection was based on how many times and how many institutions they have visited during the implementation period. The success factor is not only the fact whether they could convince decision makers on introducing CAL course in their institutions or not (it did happen in some cases which is very promising), but rather they did their best and all their efforts to make the importance of CAL courses known in professional circles.

Based on the national reports the project leader writes an international comparative report (draft, about 100 pages) after the national reports will be written in a unified format and style following the same guidelines.

Month 11: Meeting of the project partners to discuss the national reports and the draft of the international report. This meeting will take place in Budapest on 26 January, 2015 at the headquarters of HIERD. At this workshop the implementation logbooks will be introduced and discussed. Those ISIT-participants who have been invited will be familiarized with the disseminating and implementing work having been done so far; the success factors and obstacles will be analyzed; one major outcome of this workshop could be to identify these factors and clarify what steps to be taken to reach overall success.

Month 12 is about finalising the report, which will be done after this meeting.

Work Package 3: Dissemination (Associate Partners, Multipliers)

Objects of dissemination are firstly to incorporate CAL elements for CPD programmes (presented in the form of the model-curriculum BaCuLit); secondly to include the results of "action research" in implementation strategies for CPD programmes.

The project focuses on the issue of dissemination options in European teacher training. Therefore dissemination activities have begun with the Info Days, attended by the heads of CPD institutions (15 persons in each country).

The training of trainers can also be understood as dissemination. It communicates skills and materials for CAL training to a clearly defined target group that consists of 30 trainers from three countries.

In a wider sense, dissemination is aimed at all CPD institutions and teacher trainers in 8 European countries (Germany, Hungary, Romania and 5 corresponding partners). This wider target group is approached in two ways: participation of corresponding partners and publications.

5. Conclusion

ISIT aims at supporting the introduction of such training into the regular programmes of the participating institutions for in-service teacher training in three European countries: Germany, Hungary, Romania. One project aim is a broad embedment of the programme in European teacher training institutes.

A final international workshop in February 2015 will present the outcomes of the project to the international partners, incorporate their feedback and discuss their support for international dissemination. At the same time ISIT aims at developing a research strategy to identify the key factors of success for an implementation of innovation into in-service teacher training (action research).

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