

THE USE OF eTWINNING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BULGARIA

by Tsvetelena Taralova

88th School

Sofia, Bulgaria

ts_taralova@abv.bg

Abstract

A Bulgarian teacher presents her experience and self-training in ICT. Starting with changes in society, social status of teachers, use of ICT in classrooms and teacher training; the author then focuses on her own institution. This article shows the ICT usage in the writer's school through institutional support, teachers, students, ICT tools available and organization of class activities with ICT. eTwinning, www.etwinning.net, is given as an example of successful online foreign language teaching (FLT) activity. The paper ends with hopes for faster ICT development in Bulgarian school education, linked to the newly elected Bulgarian government.

1. Historical, cultural and political background

1.1 Changes since 1989

Continuous changes have been going on in Bulgaria since the end of the old communist regime in 1989. The former ideology had been influencing people's lives for more than 40 years and is still of great value for the older Bulgarians. We were taught that we lived in a perfectly arranged society, where nobody was poor or rich. People were believed to be significant not as individuals but as part of the communist system. Individual freedom and civil rights were constrained in the name of an elusive future Bulgarian society with "freedom for all".

The aim of these changes has been the introduction of democracy and market economy. Since 1989, Bulgaria has held multi-party elections and privatized its economy, but economic difficulties and a tide of corruption have led over 800,000 Bulgarians, most of them qualified professionals, to emigrate. The reform package introduced in 1997 restored positive economic growth, but led to rising social inequality. The slow reforms in education and health care and the low payment have made working in these sectors less attractive.

1.2 Social status of teachers

During the past twenty years of democracy, Bulgarian schools have lost their good reputation and teachers have been accused of low-quality teaching. The civil society sees education as a

big problem but did not support teachers during the forty-day strike in October 2007 [1]. As a result, the image of the teacher is deteriorating. According to recent statistics the percentage of teachers younger than 30 years old fell to 2.31 percent. A number of Bulgarian educators have been teaching the same subject, with the same teaching methods they have been using for years. They do not use foreign languages or computers. Every year about 2,000 professionals retire, but no new ones are being employed. Instead, other teachers at the schools have to pick up more lessons, thus making their work less effective.

One of the main directions Bulgaria has taken recently is to move away from a state-controlled model of financing schools. The local authorities and school principals control the school budgets and decide on teachers' salaries and other costs. The problem is that the difference between the payment of those professionals who use modern methods and those ones who stick to the old approaches is very small. Therefore many teachers do not see the point in investing time and effort to prepare new and interesting ICT lessons.

1.3 Use of ICT in the classroom

According to the *National Programme of School Education and Pre-school Training Preparation Development* (2006, p. 9), one of the main objectives in the Bulgarian school education is “providing good quality education, which encourages thinking and individuality, practical skills formation and personality development”. The proposed measures to realize this national agenda include changes in educational contents and programmes to update the teaching of foreign languages and computer training curricula. There is also a great necessity to introduce measures that guarantee a more serious introduction of ICT into all subjects in Bulgarian schools. The first steps have already been taken and reported on (Danish Technological Institute 2008, p. 19-20):

- a national educational portal was created (Национален образователен портал, www.start.e-edu.bg),
- at primary and secondary school level the curriculum is synchronised with the EU framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning,
- more computers are provided for schools.

Last year teachers in 31 of the biggest schools were provided with laptops and about 500 projectors were bought for these schools. The new school programme includes one hour of ICT a week as a subject for all schools from grade 5 to grade 7, with the option of introducing ICT as a subject from grade 1. For grades 9-12 the ICT school curriculum have not been changed yet; this will be done over the next three years.

Some non-ICT teachers have their lessons in the schools' computer labs, but because of busy computer rooms, the large number of students per class and the time needed to prepare such ICT lessons this is very difficult to arrange on a regular basis.

1.4. Teacher training

ICT teacher training has been part of the national educational programmes since 2005. Two years ago, EU Structural Funds provided money for free computer courses to provide all teachers with basic computer skills, but there was little implementation of ICT in the real classes. A new EU Structural Funds programme has been launched (http://europa.eu/scadplus/glossary/structural_cohesion_fund_en.htm) which gives teachers free home access to the Internet, and about 20 % of Bulgarian teachers will receive money to pay for their yearly Internet charges. A small number of foreign language teachers in Bulgaria are members of professional online groups, mainly because this is integrated into their new studies. Sometimes publishing houses and state institutions organize half-day seminars, where an ICT component is included, but they are held during the week and it is almost impossible for teachers in general to attend these events. Few foreign language teachers attend individual ICT courses funded by Comenius or Lifelong Learning Programme.

2. School setting

My school, 88th School, is located in the suburbs of Sofia with about 1,000 students and 70 teachers. It is a general state school with students aged 7-19 on primary, secondary and high school levels. Some of the classes on the upper level are intensive English language classes. Since 2005 our school has been working on international projects and programmes: eTwinning and Comenius.

2.1 Institutional support

We first started using computers actively in our school in non-ICT related subjects for communicating with foreign partners. At the beginning, in 2005, the board of governors did not believe projects had any pedagogical value, but now all of us have experienced the positive effects of international cooperation. First, our school has gained more respect in the local area and at a national level; and second, it is a very effective way to involve students who are studying different subjects. As a result some teachers started using computers in their lessons, too. Now ICT is an inseparable part of the learning process, and students and teachers are more motivated, performing real life tasks and learning by doing. The head of our school

helps us to organize seminars and working visits: in 2006 we presented our Comenius project in front of parents, local authority representatives and teachers from Sofia. During the international Comenius working visit in Sofia in 2007 students and teachers worked together to prepare multimedia and live performances which were presented to our foreign guests. Next, in 2008, students showed their work on the eTwinning project to their parents. A year later, in June 2009, special guests, among them Government and Bulgarian Lifelong Learning Programme officials, attended the current eTwinning project presentation, which was part of the school programme. The full support of the school board has contributed to the successful completion of projects and the dissemination of their results.

2.2 Teachers

There are about 70 teachers in our school. Since 2006, when our school bought a laptop computer and a data projector, half of all teachers have been using ICT in their lessons at least once a month. The rest of the colleagues almost never use computers. We have about 10 departments which have the responsibility of organizing the teaching process and common subject activities. All colleagues agree that our foreign language department is the most active and creative one. This is because we work together very well and collaborate with international partners. We use some of our lessons to work on project activities. Teachers also try to assign interesting homework where students use their home computers. Although teachers do not commonly prepare their own PowerPoint presentations due to lack of time, when they do so they tend to share the finished products with other English teachers and friends. We also watch films linked to the topics covered in the course books.

2.3 Students

Students like using computers but do not always take the work seriously. Some of them still think of computers as entertainment. Yet ICT contributes to their learning, and students present pieces of homework to their classmates and receive honest feedback. Working in groups also helps them to develop collaborative skills and tolerance towards others. Teachers are often supported by students in ICT lessons, thus leading to a better relationship. Computers help learners become more creative and self-confident. Step by step they come to understand the usefulness of ICT in their learning and their personal development. For example, students from two classes at secondary school level have worked on two successful eTwinning projects (for details see sections 3.3. and 3.4 below).

2.4 ICT tools available

The school has five computer labs with 80 up-to-date computers and one multimedia room. In ICT-related subjects, students in grades 1-7, who are being taught according to the new school curriculum, have computer lessons once a week. The larger classes in our school are divided into two groups. They study MS Office applications and use blogs and messengers. At high school level, grades 8-12, students study ICT and Informatics. They learn MS Office Applications in depth as well as programs like Corel Draw and Photo Shop for creating and editing images. They have about 4 ICT lessons a week and in their last two years at school they study programming languages: HTML, Pascal and Visual Basic.

2.5 Organization of language class activities with ICT

It is very difficult to organize a foreign language ICT lesson in one of the five computer labs at our school. Although there are many computers, most of the time they are used by other students studying ICT-related subjects. And even if there is a free ICT lab, the number of computers is not sufficient. Usually there are more than 25 students in a class but only 10 computers in each lab. We have to ask another teacher, divide the class into two parts and repeat the lessons two times. What is more, we need a lot of time to prepare such ICT lessons and it is not paid. It is easier to use ready presentations in the multimedia lab, because it changes the way of teaching, making it more interactive.

3. Examples of successful use of online tools in teaching - the eTwinning platform

3.1 How did I start?

Before becoming a teacher, I had worked as an engineer and now I can successfully combine my two qualifications. After a Comenius methodology teachers' course in Dublin in 2004, I started a Comenius school project "Medieval Roots of Present Europeans" http://www.medievalrootsofpresenteuropeans.dir.bg/_wm/basic/?df=12&dflid=2, which was an enormous motivation for my future development. The project was about common medieval roots in European countries. It required exchange of information about life in the middle ages by means of ICT tools. There were six countries in the project: Bulgaria, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Turkey.

After getting the Third Professional Qualification Level in FLT (there are two more to obtain according to Bulgarian Ministry of Education regulations) I was thinking about a new

teaching tool for my next level and I decided on eTwinning. It was September 2007 and instead of losing 40 days during the Teachers' strike I started exploring the eTwinning site.

3.2 What is eTwinning?

eTwinning is an initiative of the European Commission to encourage all schools in Europe to engage in international partnerships using many forms of communication technology (European Schoolnet, online; European Schoolnet 2007). It is a platform, an interactive site for the collaboration of schools. It has a unique structure in terms of the quality and amount of support provided for the teacher at all levels. It has a free Central Support Service (CSS) and is maintained by the European Schoolnet on behalf of the European Commission. The link of the European eTwinning Portal is www.etwinning.net.

Once registered, teachers provide information about the subject they teach, their students' age, language level, topics they are interested in, their school and their eTwinning preferences (partner countries, subjects in the project, etc.). There are sample projects which can be used by beginners. A partner finding forum helps teachers to identify possible partners. There are also many guidance tools, <http://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/help/guidelines.htm>. Once you have found a partner and agreed on the project, the schools register the partnership. The CSS approves the project and a workspace is set up for your project (TwinSpace), featuring a calendar, a forum, a mail box, a chat room, a bulletin board, a team area, content management and settings sections. Students have their own registrations and can enter the project TwinSpace at any time. Every person in the project can look through the site and upload pictures, Word document, PowerPoint and Video files.

3.3 My first eTwinning project

I decided to start my first eTwinning project with something very simple. I wanted to carry it out with my youngest students who were 13 years old. Then I found a Portuguese partner, whose students were the same age. He had had one year experience with eTwinning and suggested using a sample project model, "Culture in the Box". We called the project "We, Our School and Our Town" and there were three countries in it: Portugal, Italy and Bulgaria. The main aims of the project were improving the language and exchanging information about culture in European countries using ICT tools. Students worked on the following subjects: English, Literature, Geography, History, Science and Art. At the beginning of October 2007 I explained the project ideas to my students and invited volunteers to join the project. More than half of the students from the two classes, with 30 students each, said that they wanted to

be in the project and I was very motivated to start. Later, when they had to work on the tasks, about ten of them gave up, so we did the three activities with about 20 students. Students worked on the project tasks at home and to help them I used Skype Messenger. Students took pictures and created PowerPoint presentations and Word files on the topics. The finished products were presented to all students and to parents (see [Appendix 1](#)). At the end everyone was very happy with what we had done and students wanted to know what project they would work on next year. I must admit I did not organize the group work in the best way, but it was a start. Although I was the only teacher actively involved in the project, a geography teacher and a history teacher helped me with some advice. The project as a whole was successful and we received an EU Quality eTwinning label. Our National Support eTwinning Centre assessed my work and I was the only Bulgarian eTwinner to participate in The Climate Change eTwinning Seminar in Denmark in March 2009.

3.4 My second eTwinning project

The second project we worked on was called “The Trees of friendship”, <http://my.twinspace.etwinning.net/trees?l=en> (see illustration in [Appendix 2](#)). A Bulgarian colleague and I implemented it in a grade 8 Intensive English Language class (19 English lessons a week), with 27 students aged 15. The concept of this multipartner project was to learn about the history, tradition, culture and everyday life in other European countries through nature and the environment, with a tree presenting each country and “talking” about its country and the people living there. There were seven EU countries in the project, Greece, France, the Czech Republic, Poland, Cyprus, Spain and Bulgaria. It was an interdisciplinary project, which covered some subject areas such as Languages, Biology, Science, ICT, Literature, History, Geography and Art. To motivate students to learn foreign languages and team work productivity and improve their skills in new technologies we used the eTwinning platform to its full potential. There was a calendar with well planned activities, students wrote in the forum, teachers communicated through the mailbox, in the bulletin board we wrote about the uploaded materials (see [Appendix 3](#)), and we published files without personal information. It is a pity that only six Bulgarian students were genuinely interested in the project; the others did it because it was obligatory. However, after the project presentation everyone was very satisfied and it definitely was an event students will always remember. The project was awarded a National Quality Label and I believe it will receive more European prizes in the following competitions.

What I found very beneficial when working on the last project were project blog postings. In this, I was supported by the Greek coordinator, <http://friendshiptrees.blogspot.com/>, and I have learned how to upload simple texts and PowerPoint presentations. Working on the project I have explored a lot of different computer programs: SlideShare, MovieMaker, Blogs, Wiki, BS Player, Flickr, etc. and I now have basic knowledge which I will need in my future work.

3.5 Why participate in eTwinning projects?

In my experience participating in eTwinning projects provides the following benefits for schools, pupils and teachers:

- It motivates young people to learn together;
- It stimulates cooperation between European schools and provides a European dimension in education;
- It encourages the use of ICT in meaningful situations;
- It improves language skills in real life settings;
- It provides new ways of teaching especially for mixed-ability classes;
- It enhances participants' social and cultural skills.

These are good reasons for other teachers who are thinking of embarking on such a project.

4. Future plans, hopes and concerns

Because of its innovative ways of teaching our school has gained more respect in the local area. Most teachers in the school have been discovering enormous potential of ICT to vary their teaching. I am currently working on my First Professional Qualification Level (the highest level according to Bulgarian Ministry of Education regulations), analyzing the improvement of students' language learning motivation as a result of participating in international eTwinning projects. Soon I will start a new eTwinning project. I also hope that I will be chosen to be a Bulgarian eTwinning ambassador, because it will be easier to be more involved in the dissemination of project results and find out more about the other colleagues' eTwinning projects. Thus, I will promote eTwinning benefits to other colleagues and friends.

These days I use my free time to explore blogs and programs we are going to use in our newly approved Comenius projects "European Time in a Capsule", <http://europeantimeinacapsule.blogspot.com> , and "The Quest for the European Grail",

<http://thequestfortheuropeangrail.blogspot.com/> . In both projects we aim at improving ICT and language skills of all the participants. In both projects we address the topics using the cross curricular approach involving different school subjects such as Languages, Literature, Science, Geography, History, Art and Computer Studies. We aim to improve the knowledge of ICT in order to use it better in learning environments, to communicate and develop different materials.

A new Bulgarian government was elected in July 2009 and we have many hopes for the future. The new Minister of Education is a former school director who has experienced the problems on the ground herself. According to the Minister, one of the main aims is teacher development and improving the teachers' authority and social status.

It is very important to invest more money in education, thus for example making classes smaller and offering more ICT courses. More and more teachers in Bulgaria have realized the importance of using ICT in teaching. Many of us hope that there will be different levels of ICT teacher training courses with follow-up programmes. We need a long-term ICT strategy that every teacher is familiar with and that is implemented in every school. Classrooms with computers are needed so we can use them in every subject as part of our curriculum. Teachers' worksheets, presentations and online materials should be used increasingly to provide opportunities for teachers to develop their ICT skills further. Internet groups organized by foreign language teachers are useful for arranging online and face-to-face work with supervisors at national level.

We are at the beginning of this very long-lasting process of making ICT an inseparable part of all teachers' work. It is very slow now but it has started. The more ICT foreign language teaching volunteers we have, the faster this process will continue. Although it is difficult, I have accepted my role as a revolutionary in such an innovative area of teaching. It gives me enormous motivation to become a modern teacher in contemporary Bulgarian education.

Note

1. See <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2007/09/articles/bg0709039i.htm> (Eurofound 2008).

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Appendix 1: Part of the finished products of the project “We, Our school and Our town”:

1. Task 1 “We”

This is me:

- *My favourite book is „Emil from Loneben“.*
- *I am 11 years old.*
- *I study in 88 School Dimitar Popnikolov.*
- *And I like cats.*
- *I am in the 6th class*

Task 2 – “Our School”

Our Cafe - Faro, Portugal



This is our bar, a place where we can buy food and drinks. They don't sell fizzy drinks anylonger nor food with many calories.

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Made by Cláudia, João Cunha and Mauro

Task 3 – “Our town”

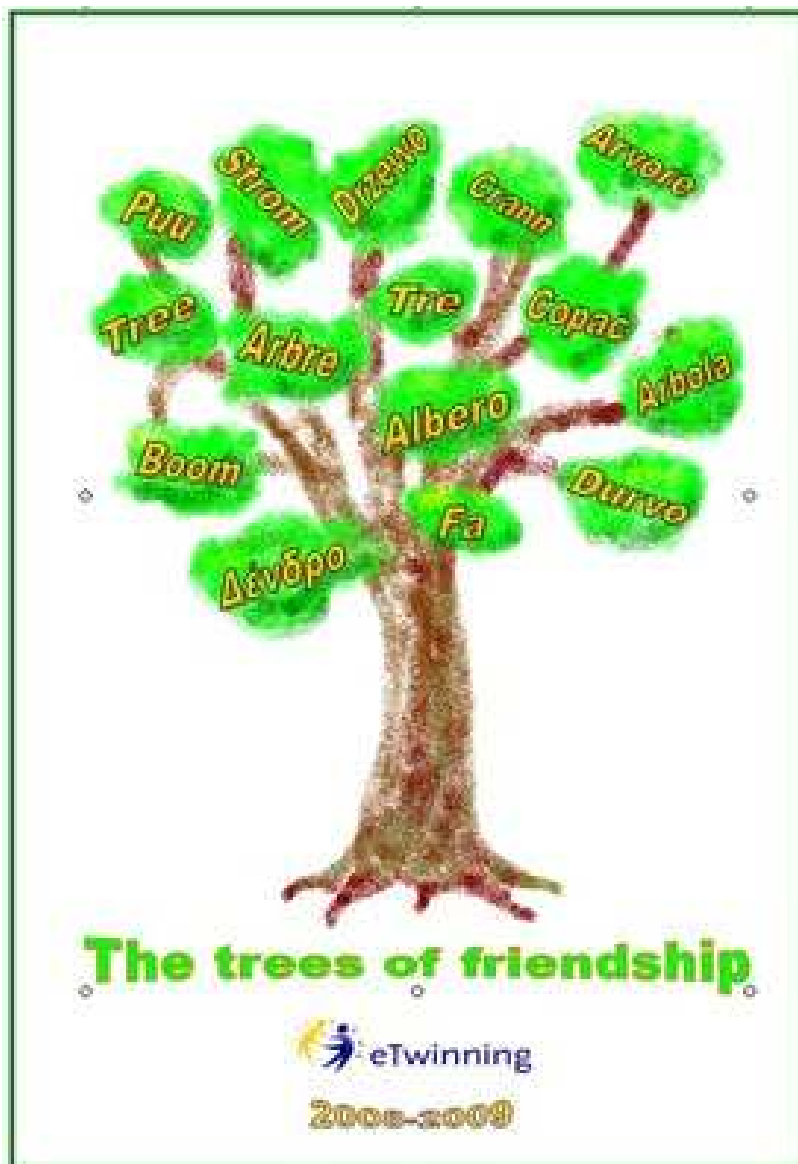
Scerni is situated on a hilly landscape of 4.500 hectares. It possesses a big band cultivated with vineyards, trees and fields. We are famous producers of wine and oil. We use modern machineries, for the cultivation the plants. There are the woods, small lakes. That is why there are numerous animals: wild boars, hares, foxes and many birds.



nature/landscapes

group No5 By Debora and Federica 36

Appendix 2: The logo of the project “The Trees of Friendship”:



Appendix 3: Part of the uploaded materials of the project “The Trees of Friendship”



The plane tree in Greek Mythology





**The Medical
Use of the
Lime Tree**