Eating Abroad Together (EAT): The impact of a European language and intercultural intervention on teachers’ knowledge and attitudes

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The Eating Abroad Together (EAT) project was a two year project funded by the Life Long Learning (transversal programme) of the European Commission.

The partners comprised organisations in Italy, Bulgaria, Romania, the Netherlands and CCCU in the UK.

The aims of the EAT project were to
• Deliver a strong message about the reasons for healthy eating
• Transfer knowledge, understanding and respect of cultural diversity, through the theme of food and daily customs
• Convey an awareness of linguistic diversity across Europe
• Show the link between language and culture, and therefore the importance of language learning
• Design and develop a user-friendly multi-lingual interactive website and data base.

How the EAT project was carried out in schools

Paired schools
7 countries – Italy, Bulgaria, Romania, UK, Netherlands – Germany, Belgium

The children’s activities included
• making posters about local festivities
• creating paintings and collage about food,
• cooking,
• bringing in recipes and food for the class to share,
• creating magazines and leaflets about food and culture,
• sending post cards to the partner school,
• listening to music from different countries,
• visiting local supermarkets to buy a healthy lunch,
• putting hands under glo lamps to evaluate hand washing
• writing letters to the partner school,
• singing songs about washing hands
• writing and presenting poems about healthy eating.

These activities were complemented by teachers, and health professionals, providing traditional education about the partner country, healthy eating, the language and the culture. Very many of these activities were shared with the partner school via computer in the form of power point slides, videos/pod casts, blogs and e mails with attachments. Some work was recorded by local print or broadcast media. Towards the end of the project each country had a Big EAT community event, where aspects of EAT were shared with the wider public.
The key output of EAT was the production of a comprehensive multilingual website containing a words and phrases database, and many examples of the teachers’ and children’s work (www.eatingabroadtogether.eu) which can be used by teachers across Europe.
What the teachers said

Objective: To evaluate the teachers’ experiences of the EAT project

Method - Interview

A sample of the participants who taught the children in schools were invited to participate in an interview with the internal evaluator. The interview was based around the following questions:

1. Firstly, please could you explain how the EAT project was carried out in your school (e.g. one or more teachers, age of the class, time scale). We need to find out about the impact of the EAT project on your own knowledge, attitudes and skills.
2. What knowledge/information have you gained from being involved in the EAT project (e.g. about healthy eating, about another culture, about your pupils?)
3. Has the EAT project influenced your attitude towards this area of work? (e.g. being more positive or negative about something?)
4. Have you developed any skills through being involved with the EAT project (e.g. IT skills, language skills?)
5. What have been the positive benefits of being involved in the EAT project?
6. What have been the negative aspects/problems of being in the EAT project?
7. Would you like to tell us anything else?

Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Number of schools represented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ROMANIA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutritionist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BULGARIA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITALY</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOLLAND (Dutch speaking schools)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNITED KINGDOM</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student teachers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student children’s nurses</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School nurse</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>18 (64% of schools who participated in EAT)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thirty three participants completed the interview, which represented 64% of the schools that participated in the EAT project and all five partner countries. They included teachers, a nutritionist, a school nurse, student teachers and student children’s nurses. They had all directly worked with the children in a teaching role, though the nutritionist and school nurse were also supporting the staff across many schools.
Eighteen participants were interviewed individually or in pairs by the internal evaluator. Five completed a written questionnaire, based on the interview questions, and sent their responses by e-mail. Ten of the UK participants attended two evaluation events which included group interviews carried out by the internal evaluator.

Results

The data collection was undertaken between March 2008 and May 2009. The participants were asked to focus on their own experiences of the EAT project, but it became clear that these were inextricably shaped by their perceptions of the children’s experiences. So the results are grouped into the impact of EAT for the participants, and the participants’ views of the impact of EAT on the children that they taught.

How the EAT project was carried out in the schools

Participants’ views of the impact of EAT on themselves

(i) How it felt to be a part of EAT
(ii) Learning about another country, culture and language
(iii) Learning about healthy eating
(iv) Enhancing and extending the curriculum
(v) Extending and enhancing teaching abilities
(vi) Challenging participants’ attitudes
(vii) Shared working and learning
(viii) Technological leaps
(ix) Time
(x) Matching schools

Participants’ views of the impact of EAT on the children

(xi) Finding out about the children
(xii) Bringing the children’s learning to life
(xiii) Encouraging credible learning

How the EAT project was carried out in the schools

UK
Student children’s nurses worked with student teachers (specialising in primary education and language learning) and taught in pairs. They were supported by the class teacher, university lecturers and a school nurse who worked across many schools.

Romania
Most of the teachers were English teachers with help from one other class teacher, and a nutritionist who worked across many schools.

Bulgaria
The teachers were class teachers, English teachers and one Russian teacher. One health professional (undefined) contributed in two schools.

Italy
English teachers and class teachers worked together.

Holland
English teachers and class teachers worked together.

**Participants' views of the impact of EAT on themselves**

(i)  **How it felt to be part of EAT**

All the participants felt positive about being involved in the EAT project. Typical emotions are illustrated in these quotes.

“Pride. Good for the school, pupils and parents. Good for our image.” (Romanian teacher)

“It has been a privilege.” (UK school nurse)

“The EAT project proved itself to me as a very meaningful project.” (Dutch teacher)

“Thank you for involving my classes and me in the project. We’ve been enjoying it a lot!” (Italian teacher)

“The project is wonderful. I’m very happy that my school was chosen.” (Bulgarian teacher)

(ii)  **Learning about another country, culture and language**

All the participants explained that EAT had allowed them to learn something new about another country, its culture and its language, and that this had been a positive experience. A typical comment was,

“It was something different. Enriching. It was good to learn more about another country. I liked learning about Holland, and I would do it again.” (Bulgarian teacher)

For a few, it prompted them to find out more about their own country. For example,

“Asking the children about their eating habits and those of their families. It made me ask other teachers e.g. the science teacher … I learnt more about Italian culture and food, because the children’s families come from different areas and cultures within Italy.” (Italian teacher)

Three participants commented on some unexpected similarities between their own and their partner school’s country. Two mentioned the similarity of food and one mentioned the similarity of language. She said,

“I learnt that the roots of some Romanian words are similar in Dutch. Shared words have travelled. It is interesting to speculate how these have evolved.” (Romanian teacher)

When discussing similarities and differences, three of the teachers explained how the EAT project had been a positive influence on challenging cultural stereotypes and prejudice. One Italian teacher explained,
“I think the project has helped students and teachers to be free from a lot of ideas ... which often give rise to prejudices about foreign cultures ... I learnt about the commonalities between the UK and Italy, and found that they were not as polarised as they are perhaps portrayed. This knowledge helped to address prejudice and misinformation,” (Italian teacher)

and another said,

“Before, some parents didn’t want their children to communicate with the ... children. There were some prejudices. I hope the project will reduce this.” (Italian teacher)

A Bulgarian teacher touched on the same theme, explaining,

“My school is a small school in a rural village, which is 95% Roma gypsy children. Many Bulgarian parents refuse to let their children study here. EAT can help with cultural understanding, not on its own, but alongside other things.” (Bulgarian teacher)

(iii) Learning about healthy eating

Ten (30%) of the participants said that EAT had increased their knowledge about healthy eating, and several spoke of reflecting on their own eating habits. A Bulgarian teacher said that learning about healthy eating had made her reflect on ecological issues and healthy lifestyles more generally. Four participants had been encouraged to change their own diets because of EAT. One said,

“We have the Eatwell plate at home. We try to follow a better diet. We try to eat more fruit, fewer sweets and more salads. I see my example as being important.” (Romanian teacher)

One participant explained that she felt particularly positive about EAT because,

“In Romania, parents can still think that chubby children are healthy children, and rich food is linked to quick food because of lack of time. These two things together are worrying. I was pleased that the parents were happy with the project.” (Romanian teacher)

The Dutch teachers also echoed the view that teachers, pupils and parents were more aware of nutrition because of EAT.

(iv) Enhancing and extending the curriculum

Several participants commented that the EAT project had made a positive contribution to the school curriculum. Three mentioned how EAT linked well to other subjects, for example one described EAT as,
A breath of fresh air, and a nice change from what we normally teach in the national curriculum. Many cross-curricular links e.g. history, geography.” (UK teacher)

and another explained,

“There have been plenty of links with the History and Science teachers who gave the reasons for the different cultural eating habits.” (Italian teacher)

Others spoke of how the EAT project had extended the curriculum. For example, the Romanian teachers explained that teaching children about healthy eating was new in their country, and how they had found food to be an effective vehicle for communication. One said,

“It was interesting to note that healthy eating was so well represented in other schools abroad ... I was fascinated that this could be a subject in itself for such young children,” (Romanian teacher)

Another Romanian colleague said,

“It is a very practical way to combine knowledge about English with healthy eating, and cross cultural learning. It is amazing.” (Romanian teacher)

These comments contrasted with a teacher from a Dutch speaking school, who said,

“... we were already teaching about healthy food before this programme. It’s normal when you teach children, that you give attention to this subject.” (Dutch teacher)

(v) Extending and enhancing teaching abilities

Ten (30%) participants discussed how the EAT project had extended and challenged their teaching abilities. The UK student children’s nurses talked about their new experience in a school, the curriculum, and how they had learnt the skills of discipline and behaviour management in class. They had received useful feedback on their teaching skills, and had better understood how schools function. The UK school nurse discussed how EAT had also given her the opportunity to learn from teachers and how she had tried to improve her own lessons as a result.

Experienced teachers spoke of extending themselves. For example one said,

“It was a good stimulus to understanding my limits, and trying fresh ideas. It has made me think about my teaching because I was doing something different.” (Italian teacher)

and another,

“Working together, being busy in a practical way, learning by doing instead of learning out of a book ... Out of your own
experience, pictures of meals etcetera, you work on your own vocabulary.” (Dutch teacher)

All the participants gave examples of how EAT activities had encouraged them to reflect on their teaching practice. They outlined a number of activities which had either worked particularly well, or not so well, and went on to reflect about why it was successful or what could be improved. The UK student nurses and student teachers detailed the skills that had been developed as a result of EAT. These included class control, presentation skills, talking to children, adapting to different circumstances, making connections, reasoning, listening, time management, organisational skills, staying calm, assertiveness and juggling multiple tasks.

(vi) Challenging participants’ attitudes

One Bulgarian teacher observed with interest how her Italian counterpart managed the challenge of teaching English to a class of children from multiple nationalities. She explained,

“I learnt that our ... link school has children from all nationalities. It surprised me ... Here in Bulgaria we have different cultures, but all the children are born in Bulgaria ... It also made me realise that in Bulgaria we like to be accepted, but are we ready to accept foreigners? Bulgarian parents don’t want their children to study with Roma gypsies.”

Later, she continued,

“I saw pictures on the website of children with disabilities being involved in activities. I was surprised. We ... should learn from this.” (Bulgarian teacher)

(vii) Shared working and learning

The participants mentioned many skills that the EAT project had encouraged them to use or develop, and the most common were those concerning teamwork with colleagues and working in partnership with people from other professions. For example one Romanian school invited another Romanian school to come and share some of their work. The UK school nurse explained that she was aware that she had been able to bring her experience to the project and share it with the student children’s nurses and student teachers, and the student children’s nurses and the school nurse had learnt from experienced teachers. An Italian teacher explained that nurses do not go into schools in Italy, and after having heard about the UK system, was going to try to get nurses involved in future. In Romania, as a new idea, the teachers invited a nutritionist into their schools. One said,

“The impact of the nutritionist was remarkable. After her input they [the children] were more engaged ...” (Romanian teacher)

Three participants mentioned the importance of the plenary meetings for their shared learning. The meetings, held in Iash, Verona, Sofia and Canterbury, provided the opportunity for several of the participants to present and share their work. The UK school nurse’s comments illustrate the richness of experience.
“I have learnt about different cultures, especially the traditional/folk traditions, including the religious aspects and the saints etc. Today I learnt about Dutch culture and language. I saw a video about children in a care home, the team work, the older children teaching the younger lifeskills for preparing to leave. I will take that back to my work with looked after children. Having this project, it makes it more real. Seeing it in another country, sharing...”
(UK school nurse)

An Italian teacher described the exchanging of experiences and opinions as an extraordinary occasion to learn, and a Romanian teacher spoke of how the meeting had altered her understanding of EAT. She said,

“At the meeting in Iash, I became more motivated and realised that the partners were very interested in us. I better understood what it was all about, and I realised that I could use my imagination.”
(Romanian teacher)

Two of the participants explained how being part of EAT had helped them to feel part of Europe. One said,

“Students can find connections between nations. We are all European.”
(Romanian teacher)

(viii) Technological leaps

The EAT project largely depended upon schools communicating with one another using technology. Participants took photographs, filmed activities, sent e mails and contributed to blogs. Five participants mentioned information technology when describing the knowledge and skills that EAT had fostered. Two Italian teachers cited the uploading of audio and video materials onto the website in particular, and one Romanian teacher talked about how she had learnt a lot about what makes a good film. These positive experiences had increased confidence, as illustrated by this comment,

“This experience encouraged me to increase computer based learning and working in groups. I think I’ll use both computers and the internet more in lessons.”
(Italian teacher)

Six (18%) of the participants cited the web site as one of the positive aspects of the EAT project. Three Romanian teachers reported that they had found it easy to use, and had encouraged the children to show it to their parents, and one said,

“I like the fact that the children own it.”
(Romanian teacher)

These sentiments were echoed by UK and Bulgarian teachers who said,

“The EAT web site is great, very useful” (UK teachers)

and

“I like the web site. I like that you can learn one word in several languages.”
(Bulgarian teacher)
One teacher thought that the web site could be improved. Her comment highlighted the tension between promoting healthy eating and sharing traditional recipes. She said,

“A lot of foods that are on the web site are not healthy. I think that some are fatty and fried foods.”

(Bulgarian teacher)

However, the use of computers was one of only three aspects of the evaluation that produced any negative comments, the others being time and matching schools. Four participants explained that EAT had been limited by the information technology capability of either their link school or themselves. So a problem in one school affected both.

The most negative comment of the evaluation came from an Italian teacher who explained,

“I am scared of computers, EAT helped me to get over my e mail phobia, and I have now started to send e mails. I felt stupid. I found the internet and blogs made me feel anxious because the project seemed to be so dependent upon IT. I hoped that a colleague would be able to help me, but he wasn’t able to help and I felt let down. I would have liked to bring my children to the computer lab and let them see the web site, but I wasn’t able. ... I would have liked a postal package, and some normal letters.”

(Italian teacher)

The two Bulgarian teachers explained that there were problems with the internet provider contracted by the Ministry of Education, and that the teachers had sometimes worked from home in order to send e mails. One Romanian teacher explained that accessing the computer lab had been challenging and in Italy some of the schools did not have access to computers at the beginning of the project.

A couple of the participants mentioned that the post had been used to send materials, some of the participants within countries had tried to support each other and in one case at least, a teacher had travelled to her link school in another country. The quantity of exchanged communication appeared to vary between schools. Three participants would have liked more. This was a typical comment,

“We would have liked more from the children to the children. If we had received more blogs, we would have responded more.”

(Italian teacher)

(ix) Time

The UK, Romanian and Dutch teachers mentioned the need for more time either for the work or in terms of delays. For example one said,

“Most teachers will say this, I think. The biggest problem is time. We have to work in our methods and finish them before the end of the school year. Translating in English is not very easy for our children because they only get basic English. Then the teacher has to do most of the work. And there is our problem again, time.”

(Dutch teacher)
and another,

“Initially, it took time to make the link with the Bulgarian school and getting feedback has been slow, but we think this is getting better.” (UK teachers)

(x) Matching schools

The Dutch teachers and one of the Romanian teachers mentioned that the age gap between the linked schools had been too great for effective sharing of learning, though they had tried their best to make it work.

Participants’ views of the impact of EAT for the children

(xi) Finding out about the children

Twelve of the participants said that the EAT project had opened a window into the worlds of the children that they taught. For example, one Italian teacher said,

“It has been useful to know not only my pupils’ eating habits, which were not surprising, but also the way they consider other people’s tastes and customs.” (Italian teacher)

Three participants were pleasantly surprised by what they found, for example,

“I now have a more positive idea about the possibilities of some pupils. They have shown themselves to me in another way than I knew them.” (Dutch teacher)

“I am amazed at children’s ability to use a dictionary and write correctly. I trust my children more. They liked the subject, so it connected with them. I was surprised that they knew so much about healthy eating.” (Romanian teacher)

An Italian teacher found out that some of her pupils were thinking about catering as a future job.

Four participants were concerned about their discoveries. An Italian and a Romanian teacher were surprised to discover that some of their pupils did not have breakfast, though the Italian teacher reported that the EAT work had encouraged some children to start having breakfast. Another Romanian teacher found out that some of her eleven and twelve year olds had concerns about body image and dieting, and intended to work with the parents on this. An Italian teacher was shocked to find that some of her pupils drank beer or wine, and a teacher from a Dutch speaking school discovered that some of her pupils had problems with calculation and language skills which had not previously been recognised.

(xii) Bringing the children’s learning to life

The participants were not directly asked to comment on the children’s learning, but it became clear that the most positive aspect of the EAT project for all the participants was to
see how it motivated and encouraged children's learning. This was partly because EAT was seen to be relevant and real to children's lives. For example, a Romanian teacher said,

“It brings the school closer to life.” (Romanian teacher)

and the Bulgarian teacher explained,

“Students discover the importance of language learning, acquire knowledge and skills for teamwork. They also develop their knowledge of information technologies.”  
(Bulgarian teacher)

The UK teachers explained that the children liked the idea that another school was going to see their photos and videos. They liked ‘being seen’. The teachers continued,

“The contact makes it more real. It's ‘real life directed' learning as opposed to learning from a text book.”  
(UK teacher)

In one Romanian school EAT had fostered extended learning through to the community. The teacher said,

“The children plan meetings to do projects and they go to others’ houses to cook their healthy recipes. The children educate the parents.”  
(Romanian teacher)

The teacher explained how the parents had supplied ingredients, and had loved the films that had been made of their children doing EAT activities. In this way EAT had brought the school together with the parents. She summed up her thoughts by suggesting that EAT had, "Forced communication."

(xiii) Encouraging credible learning

EAT was also described as facilitating credible learning. Importantly, explained one Romanian teacher, EAT had been delivered over a series of lessons, not a single event, and was accepted by parents as being ‘good academic work’ with credibility. This theme was extended by a Dutch teacher who commented on how the nutrition theme was a nice addition to learning a foreign language. Another Dutch colleague continued,

“Now the collected material has been developed ... it will/can be used in schools. So apart from the website, further material can be developed for learning language skills.”  
(Dutch teacher)

Conclusions

- All the participants were overwhelmingly positive in their evaluation of the EAT project as a vehicle for effective, meaningful and ‘real’ learning about their own and other countries, cultures, language and food.
- The majority of participants reported that EAT had enhanced and extended their own knowledge and skills as teachers, and facilitated positive engagement with their pupils, local communities, other professions and/or teaching colleagues working elsewhere.
• The participants’ EAT related work was either enabled or limited according to the provision of technology and the quality of the related support.
• A few participants reported struggling to find time to incorporate EAT, whilst a few reported how the work had effectively been used as a vehicle through which to teach other subjects in the curriculum.
• The matching of similar age groups across schools was highlighted by a few as being important for EAT success.

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