Fostering Learner Autonomy and Intercultural Learning Through Face-to-Face Mobility and Virtual Exchange: PluriMobil Resources

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Abstract Even though learning mobility (both face-to-face and virtual) is widely promoted and funded by a number of institutions worldwide, voluminous research suggests that international experiences do not always yield positive results. Therefore, to turn a mobility programme into a learning opportunity, it is necessary to provide student sojourners with guidance at different stages of the experience. PluriMobil teaching resources, developed with support of the Council of Europe, aim to help teachers and teacher educators guide their students through a mobility experience, especially in terms of developing intercultural and plurilingual competences, fostering learner autonomy and raising language awareness before, during and after either a face-to-face or virtual intercultural encounter. Because the intricate relationship between intercultural competence and learner autonomy is often overlooked, in this chapter we present the rationale behind those PluriMobil resources that focus specifically on developing learner autonomy. By referring to sample activities, we illustrate how the development of learning strategies, reflective skills and goal setting can be promoted in a learning mobility context.

Keywords Learner autonomy · Learning mobility · Virtual exchange · International experience · Teaching resources · Intercultural competence

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1   Introduction

Learning mobility is understood here as an educational experience in a new environment that aims at enhancing the development of the plurilingual, intercultural and professional skills of students at all ages. In this chapter, we focus particularly on two forms of learning mobility: face-to-face mobility (also termed as physical mobility) and Virtual Exchange (VE). The former involves moving to a different location and for different purposes, for instance students may move to a new learning environment to participate in a language or university course, carry out a work placement, study abroad, or complete a project with students from partner institutions. Virtual Exchange (also known as telecollaboration or online intercultural exchange) involves interaction and collaboration with peers from geographically distant locations, facilitated by means of online technology (through such tools as social media, videoconferencing, e-learning platforms, etc.) and carried out in an institutionalised setting (Belz, 2003; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020). VE allows for cooperation with individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds while staying at home. It is our understanding that virtual and physical mobility are not restrained to cross-border cooperation only, but may also refer to intra-national contacts, especially in the case of multilingual countries (cf. Egli Cuenat et al., 2015a, pp. 15–16).

The benefits of mobility programmes are enumerated in a number of documents issued by the European Commission such as *Green Paper: Promoting the Learning Mobility of Young People* (2009) and *Languages for Jobs: Providing Multilingual Communication Skills for the Labour Market* (2010). The documents stress that a mobility experience has a positive influence on participants' personal growth as well as communicative and intercultural competences. Mobility is also viewed as a valuable contribution to plurilingual and intercultural education, a key issue of the Council of Europe's language policy (see the website of the *European Centre for Modern Languages* and the *Language Policy Unit*'s platform "Languages in Education – Language for Education"). Moreover, students who take part in learning mobility initiatives are more likely to opt for professional opportunities abroad. With this in mind, many schools and institutions of higher education in Europe and beyond offer different forms of mobility programmes, which are often financially and administratively supported on the basis of bilateral or multilateral agreements as well as programmes funded by international organizations, with the European Union being the most notable example in the European context.

However, recent empirical data do not always support these claims and may suggest that the relationship between students' international experiences and intercultural or communicative growth is not as straightforward as earlier assumed (Deardorff, 2006; Jackson, 2012; Richardson, 2016). It appears that the ultimate learning gains of any mobility experience vary from individual to individual and depend largely on the participants' previous experience in travelling, sociocultural knowledge, initial level of intercultural awareness, openness and tolerance (Jackson, 2010). Similarly, Olson et al. (2005) observe that in the process of preparing a mobility initiative, many organizations tend to focus on administrative aspects, whereas a formal

statement of learning outcomes to be achieved by the end of the experience seems to be downplayed and severely neglected. These studies indicate that intercultural encounters do not automatically result in personal, linguistic and intercultural gains; therefore, in order to turn a mobility programme into a true learning opportunity, there is a need to establish coherent learning objectives and provide the participants with guidance and support at different stages of the experience (Dooly & O'Dowd, 2018; Heinzmann et al., 2014; Jackson, 2012, 2014; O'Dowd et al., 2020).

Developed in response to these challenges, *PluriMobil* resources enable teachers and teacher trainers to guide their students through the entire process of an intercultural experience. These practical resources were produced as an outcome of the 5-year *PluriMobil – Plurilingual and Intercultural Learning through Mobility* project, which was funded and supported by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) of the Council of Europe in Graz. PluriMobil offers five sets of practical resources designed for five different target groups: primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools (both general and vocational) as well as teacher education. With the objective of assisting mobility participants in benefiting fully from this learning opportunity, PluriMobil aims to develop their intercultural and plurilingual competences, foster learner autonomy and raise language awareness throughout the entire mobility programme: at the preparatory stage, during the stay itself and on return to the home institution. The three-stage approach should be analogously implemented in Virtual Exchange initiatives. The PluriMobil resources were not designed for any specific mobility context but can be used flexibly and adapted to the needs of specific teaching and learning situations.

Because the intricate relationship between intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and learner autonomy is often overlooked in study abroad research and practical resources alike, in this chapter we present the rationale behind PluriMobil resources that focus specifically on developing learners' independence, autonomy and reflective skills in the mobility context. The chapter starts with an overview of the concept of learner autonomy in the field of foreign language teaching and learning. Next, our understanding of the interdependence between learner autonomy and the ability to communicate cross-culturally is delineated. After outlining the objectives, structure and components of PluriMobil, our approach to fostering learner autonomy in the mobility context, illustrated with sample activities, is presented. We hope that the approach to supporting learner mobility proposed in this text will contribute to overcoming the existing gap between policy, practice and research findings.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Learner Autonomy

The importance of learner autonomy was highlighted by studies that attempted to identify characteristics of 'the good language learner' (Griffiths, 2008; Naiman et al., 1978; Rubin, 1975). Based on previous work, it appeared that the most

successful learners were those individuals who took an active role in the learning process and applied certain independent measures to accomplish their learning objectives. Such learners are able to readjust the goals set by teachers to suit their own learning needs, select appropriate learning strategies and constantly monitor the effectiveness of their learning by introducing any necessary changes.

One of the first definitions of learner autonomy in language learning was formulated by Holec (1981, p. 3), who put forward an assumption that autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". His definition implies that autonomous behaviour is ideally present at all stages of the learning process: from goal setting and ongoing management to the evaluation of outcomes. Little (1991), on the other hand, takes a more psychological perspective and views autonomy as

> a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts. (Little, 1991, p. 4)

Benson (2001) further develops these definitions and suggests that learner autonomy essentially entails three interdependent levels of control over: learning management (learners' decisions concerning planning, implementation and evaluation of the learning process), cognitive processes (learners' mental involvement in the learning process) and learning content (learners' ability to establish learning goals as well as to select appropriate materials, methods and techniques to accomplish these objectives).

Although initially learner autonomy was associated with self-instructed adult learning, nowadays it constitutes an integral part of mainstream education, and *learner training* (also referred to as *pedagogy for learning* and *learning to learn*) is seen as a prerequisite for effective language learning "here and now" to prepare learners to pursue their educational goals in other contexts. Over the past 20 years, several documents of the Council of Europe have underlined the curricular relevance of the development of learner autonomy. Being a framework for language learning policy in European countries, the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001) sends a clear signal that learning to learn, which is deemed as a non-linguistic component of language competence, should be incorporated in curricula and teaching resources. The *Framework for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures* (FREPA, Candelier et al., 2012), in turn, formulates descriptors of knowledge, attitudes and abilities dedicated to language acquisition and learning.[1] The *Guide for the Development and Implementation of Curricula for Plurilingual and Intercultural Education* (Beacco

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[1] For details see sections KVII Knowledge about language and acquisition/learning, section AVI Attitudes to learning and section SVII Knows how to learn.

et al., 2016) recommends that the curricular development of learner autonomy[2] be approached transversally, across different languages.[3]

Dam (1995) states that the development of autonomy is a gradual process that shapes teachers' and learners' learning experiences and entails changes in the classroom environment. Learners are not likely to start to believe in their own independence and to make decisions concerning their own learning, unless the teacher transfers some part of control and power to them (Dam, 1995; Little, 2009). This perspective highlights the role of cooperation and negotiation between different agents in developing autonomy in the context of instructed language learning. In a learner-centred classroom, instead of assuming the role of an authority and a sole decision-maker, a teacher needs to become a facilitator and guide that encourages the learners to reflect on their own learning process, to formulate interpretations and to make independent decisions about what, how, why, when and where to learn. Wilczyńska (1999) highlights the link between the process of developing autonomy and building individual communicative competence – learners need to assume an active role in the process by discovering both the properties and the communicative value of the foreign language.

There is a variety of pedagogical measures and tools that promote learner autonomy and self-directed learning in the classroom context. For instance, through language strategy instruction learners become more aware of the nature of language learning, develop familiarity with a number of possible language learning techniques and, thus, are better equipped to cope with recurring problems (Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Michońska-Stadnik, 1996, 2009, 2011; Oxford, 1990, 2017). Gremmo and Riley (1995) emphasise the need to prepare learners to analyse and reflect on the processes taking place in the classroom, which can be accomplished, for instance, by means of self-assessment, which can be introduced in the form of questionnaires, rubrics or learning journals. Additionally, teachers' formative feedback on learners' performance, which may take the form of portfolios, diaries (Dam, 2009; Yang, 2007), face-to-face conferences (Peñaflorida, 2002) and other types of ongoing evaluation (Brown, 2004; O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996), offers learners information concerning their strengths and weaknesses as well as the possible means that can be applied to overcome encountered problems. The use of task-based and problem-solving activities, which essentially involve collaboration with other learners and encourage critical thinking, also engages learners in reflection on both the process and product of work, thus, contributing to developing their autonomy (Nunan, 2004; Sercu, 2002). Finally, the European Language Portfolio (ELP) is a powerful tool for supporting learner autonomy, goal setting, self-assessment and other forms of reflective language learning (Little, 2009, 2016; Kühn & Pérez Cavana, 2012). Although it is often overlooked in teaching practice and subject literature alike, the ELP also aims at developing pluricultural competences by encouraging reflection on both linguistic and cultural encounters, collecting evidence of

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[2] Further details in sections 2.2 and 2.3 (Beacco et al., 2016).

[3] Further details in section 2.6 (Beacco et al., 2016).

culture contact and self-assessment of language skills on the basis of descriptors that, in some cases, refer to "linguistically mediated culture" (Little & Simpson, 2003, p. 4).

2.2   The Interdependence Between Learner Autonomy and ICC

In the era of globalisation and widespread use of computer-mediated communication, autonomous learning skills are particularly valuable in out-of-school contexts, which include study and residence abroad, school exchanges, online projects and other forms of learning mobility that involve interaction with both native- and non-native speakers of the target language (Nunan & Richards, 2015). Effective communication in such contexts is conditional not only on the learners' linguistic skills, but also on their ability to cope with situations that abound in novelty and ambiguity on both linguistic and cultural levels. Consequently, because learner autonomy facilitates the processes of learning and communicating in a foreign language in a variety of settings, the interdependence between this notion and ICC is evident.

The necessity to link language and culture in the language classroom has been the subject of attention in the literature for some time (cf. Czura, 2016, 2018; Egli Cuenat & Bleichenbacher, 2013; Kramsch, 1993; Liddicoat, 2002; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Sercu, 2005). Dervin and Liddicoat (2013, p. 8), to highlight the joint nature of these two elements, refer to language as "the unnamed dimension of the intercultural". Looking back at acknowledged models of communicative competence (cf. Bachman, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980; Council of Europe, 2001; Hymes, 1972), it is clear that even though the term intercultural competence is sometimes not mentioned verbatim, successful communication is conditional on the speaker's ability to communicate both accurately and appropriately in a given social context. Intercultural competence also implies the ability to be reflective about the communicative and linguistic dimensions of culture and to use appropriate communicative strategies. Accordingly, socially and culturally acceptable interaction takes place when the speakers are able to exploit their linguistic resources efficiently in the spirit of mutual understanding and respect. Sercu (2002, 72) asserts that "all language education should always be also intercultural education"; consequently, teachers should adopt an integrated approach to language and culture teaching (Dervin & Liddicoat, 2013; Sercu, 2005).

Whereas some attention has been paid to the interdependence between communicative and intercultural competences, the links between the latter and learner autonomy have not been recognised until recently (Benson, 2007; Little, 2009). In school practice, the integrated approach to teaching language and culture is frequently neglected at the cost of knowledge-based aspects of ICC (Castro & Sercu, 2005). Sercu et al. (2005, p. 494) rightly note that "Because teachers tend not to teach culture, they may not yet have come to realise that the cultural dimension of foreign language education is well suited for promoting learner autonomy and that such an approach might be beneficial to language learning as well". Apart from

facilitating linguistic growth, learner autonomy entails also deeper skills of analysis, reflection and evaluation and it contributes to learners' social and personal development.

As debates on notions of culture and the intercultural in the field of education and other fields suggest, cultures should be understood as complex, dynamic and variable phenomena, as opposed to being viewed as fixed and static entities attributable to specific nations or ethnic groups (Dervin & Tournebise, 2013; Holliday, 2010). Hence, learner autonomy appears particularly pertinent in the context of cross-cultural communication, which relies not as much on the speakers' knowledge of the target language culture, as on their ability to analyse new phenomena, reflect on novel situations, cope with uncertainties and socially construct their own perspectives. As Elsen and St. John (2007, p. 22) rightly assert, "a focus on learner autonomy holds the promise that values and norms are communicated, mediated, and developed rather than being transmitted."

Given that nowadays foreign language learners interact cross-culturally across a multitude and variety of media and contexts, the need for fostering intercultural and autonomous learning skills becomes even more pronounced both in and beyond the language classroom. In a study exploring the potential of blogs for learner autonomy and intercultural communication in a study abroad context, Lee (2011) discovered that the success of autonomous and intercultural learning in a group of undergraduate students depended on well-designed tasks as well as effective metacognitive and cognitive skills. Also, Harvey et al. (2011) indicate that one of the reasons the benefits of immersion programmes for language teachers were not fully exploited was insufficient goal-setting support prior to departure. Taking into account such research findings as well as our own mobility experiences, with the view of supporting a holistic development of mobility participants, PluriMobil resources focus on both intercultural skills and autonomous language learning.

3   PluriMobil Resources and Learner Autonomy

Motivated by research findings suggesting that not all participants of mobility experiences equally benefit in terms of intercultural and communicative competences, PluriMobil resources were produced to assist teachers of primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school (general and vocational education) as well as teacher educators in designing a pedagogical intervention aimed at supporting student development in the course of learning mobility programmes.

PluriMobil was developed by an international team in two stages as a part of two subsequent ECML programmes: *Empowering Language Professionals* and *Learning through Languages*. The final product includes five sets of so-called *lesson plans*, a *Handbook* (Egli Cuenat et al., 2015a) and a *Quick Start Guide* that are freely available on the project website (plurimobil.ecml.at). The resources are available in English and French but are also addressed to teachers of other languages, who might translate the selected parts of the lesson plans into their respective target

languages. Although PluriMobil resources were primarily designed for foreign language teachers, some lesson plans, especially those focused on developing intercultural skills, can be also used by teachers of other subjects. The lesson plans offer a wide range of practical activities that are accompanied by convenient photocopiable examples that can be either used in their present shape or customised to the needs of different mobility projects, educational contexts and language groups. Most of the lesson plans include instructions to tasks that may be completed in three phases: (1) before a mobility/VE project, supervised by a regular teacher or a team of teachers in the home institution; (2) while abroad in the host institution or in the course of a VE project; and (3) once the project is finalised. The PluriMobil *Handbook*, offers a thorough, yet practically-oriented, introduction to the lesson plans and provides some guidelines on implementing the resources in practice. Finally, the *Quick Start Guide* is a concise manual that offers teachers and teacher educators step-by-step practical instruction on how to start using the tool in their contexts.

To promote good practice in mobility programmes by developing plurilingual and intercultural competences, PluriMobil resources contain numerous references to other Council of Europe publications. For instance, the objectives were formulated on the basis of such reference documents as the *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2001) and the *Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures* (*FREPA,* Candelier et al., 2012). Additionally, selected fragments of the *European Language Portfolio* (*ELP*),[4] the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (*AIE*),[5] the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* (EPOSTL, Newby et al., 2007), *Mirrors and Windows* (Huber-Kriegler et al., 2003), and *Developing and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence–A Guide for Language Teachers and Teacher Educators* (Lázár et al., 2007) have also been adopted so that they can be used to support different stages of a mobility project.

PluriMobil resources reflect the complex nature of and the interdependence between communicative and intercultural competences; therefore, apart from developing these two competences, the lesson plans essentially are geared toward non-linguistic elements that are pertinent to successful learning and communication including reflective practice, autonomous learning and soft skills. PluriMobil resources have been developed to encourage students to approach mobility experiences as autonomous learners who are able to self-assess their communicative competence, to choose their most effective learning strategies and to set their own learning goals without the teacher's support. While the approach to ICC adopted in the resources has been delineated elsewhere (Egli Cuenat, 2018), this chapter focuses specifically on how PluriMobil facilitates the process of developing autonomous learning skills in a mobility context.

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[4] More information available at: http://www.coe.int/en/web/portfolio.

[5] More information available at: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/autobiography/default_en.asp.

3.1 Strategy Instruction

Oxford (2017, p. 48) defines L2 learning strategies as:

> complex, dynamic thoughts and actions, selected and used by learners with some degree of consciousness in specific contexts in order to regulate multiple aspects of themselves (such as cognitive, emotional, and social) for the purpose of (a) accomplishing language tasks; (b) improving language performance or use; and/or (c) enhancing long-term proficiency

Building on her work, some PluriMobil lesson plans aim at equipping students with appropriate strategies that will help them independently develop their language skills in a mobility context. Similar to other lesson plans, the resources focused on strategy instruction also guide users throughout the entire stay abroad or VE project. First, from an array of possible strategies, students select the ones they would like to test during their mobility experience and then, upon the project completion, the students' self-reflection on the effectiveness of the undertaken measures is encouraged. This procedure reflects the usual approach to strategy instruction that involves preparation (laying the groundwork for learner-centred learning), presentation (explicit explanation of strategies), practice (guiding students on putting the newly learnt strategies into use), evaluation (engaging students into reflective practice on the used strategies) and expansion (encouraging students to apply the strategies in unfamiliar context) (cf. e.g. Oxford, 2017).

The presentation of learning strategies in PluriMobil is largely based on selected elements of the *European Language Portfolio* (ELP) and *Helping Learners Learn: Exploring Strategy Instruction in Language Classrooms across Europe* (Harris, 2001). In the contexts where the ELP is already used, the teachers are advised as to how this tool can serve to support language learning during a stay abroad or with a virtual mobility project. Alternatively, for teachers who are unfamiliar with the ELP, some relevant tasks have been selected and adapted to guide students through the three stages of a mobility experience. The resources available in the ELP appeared to be particularly useful in the exploration of learning techniques and resources that facilitate progress in the four language skills. A sample PluriMobil activity designed with the objective of strategy instruction in lower secondary school is found in Fig. 1. Here, as a result of discussing the advantages and drawbacks of diverse learning techniques in pairs or groups, students reflect on the usefulness of the learning resources they already know and additionally become familiarised with a number of new possible tools for improving language skills. With a heightened awareness of learning resources and strategies, in the next step, students are prompted to formulate language learning objectives to be achieved during a mobility project.

Additionally, because most of the mobility projects entail communication with speakers of other languages, special attention is also paid to the use of communication strategies. While completing a checklist containing such entries as "I change to my first language or another language and borrow a word or an expression from that language", or "I use mime or gesture or a facial expression" (Egli Cuenat et al., 2015c, p. 53), students discuss which strategies may be of help in case of a

EXAMPLE 1

Learning strategies

How do I learn languages?

Mark [√] in the first column what you do to learn a foreign language. In the second column mark those techniques you would like to use in the future. You can add your own ideas.

	In the language I am learning	I do the following	I would like to learn like this
I listen to	songs on the radio, TV	[ ]	[ ]
	recorded lessons on tapes and CDs	[ ]	[ ]
	radio and TV news	[ ]	[ ]
	...	[ ]	[ ]
I watch	films on TV, in the cinema, on video/DVD	[ ]	[ ]
	other TV programs	[ ]	[ ]
	...	[ ]	[ ]

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Fig. 1 A fragment of Lesson plan 9 for lower secondary school: *The European Language Portfolio: How do I learn and how do I want to learn?* (Egli Cuenat et al., 2015b, p. 39)

communicative breakdown and then, once the mobility project is completed, analyse the extent to which these techniques proved useful in a real-life context.

3.2 Developing Reflective Skills

No matter whether a lesson plan targets the development of learner autonomy, communicative competence or intercultural skills, the activities are designed in such a way so as to engage prospective users in reflective thinking. Regarding intercultural

competence, the students are invited to reflect on such aspects as: perceptions of their own and other cultures, approaches to otherness, the ability to cope with ambiguities and the impact the intercultural encounters exerted on their initial attitudes and beliefs.

In terms of autonomous language learning, the reflection process involves self-assessment of language competence, setting learning goals to be accomplished and a final evaluation of the projected outcomes. Active engagement in self-assessment may encourage students to take responsibility for planning, management and evaluation of the learning process; to this end, as research indicates, the ELP has proved to be a highly relevant tool (Kühn & Pérez Cavana, 2012; Little, 2009). An example of such a self-assessment task for the lower secondary level is presented in Fig. 2. Here, the descriptors at A2 level, adapted from the ELP, have been tailored to encourage students to assess their language competences, engage in reflection, highlight what they need to practice and, with this knowledge, set learning goals to be accomplished when abroad. The students return to the goals they have set and reflect on them once the mobility is completed. Naturally, the selection of learning goals depends on the type, length and aims of a mobility project. Thus, both teachers and learners are invited to select any objectives they believe are relevant to their context. It is worth noting that because vocational upper secondary school students frequently undertake a job placement as a part of their mobility project, in the lesson plans devoted to this target group the self-assessment checklists have been enriched with descriptors specifically referring to language use in work-related situations, such as, "I can understand what a client/patient/supplier, etc. requires on the telephone", "I can understand the main points in a meeting with my colleagues", etc. (Egli Cuenat et al., 2015d, p. 39).

Additionally, in order for reflection to address the entire mobility experience, ideally the students should document their self-assessment, established goals, intercultural encounters, evidence of growth and other experiences that are linked to their mobility activities (e.g. photos, drawings, leaflets, souvenirs, audio and video recordings, completed tasks). Depending on teachers' and students' preferences or technical possibilities, the documentation of a mobility project might take the form of a traditional or electronic portfolio, a diary, a notebook, a paper file, a ring binder, a blog or a personalized webpage. In the contexts in which the ELP is used, the evidence of the mobility experience can be collected as an inherent part of the ELP Dossier. The use of portfolios in intercultural contexts affords students an opportunity to construct their own meanings, make judgments and analyse both intercultural and linguistic choices in collaboration with the teacher (O'Dowd & Müller-Hartmann, 2018; Scarino, 2010; Schulz, 2007). Based on their experience of pedagogical interventions in study abroad contexts, Corder et al. (2018, 290) note that "Reflective journals, blogs, or portfolios are useful for fostering critical reflection, working through feedback from mentors, and undertaking collaborative learning with other participants". Drawing on this, PluriMobil explores the potential of a portfolio to record the process of becoming interculturally and communicatively competent through mobility, beyond the foreign language classroom. Figure 3 presents the during and after stage of Lesson plan 2 addressed to student teachers.

EXAMPLE 2
Goal setting checklist (A2)

Have a look at the table:
Before your mobility activity, list some language goals you'd like to achieve. Think about what you can do to achieve these goals.
During your mobility activity, check if you are really doing what you have planned to do.
After your mobility activity, tick the goals you have actually achieved.

GOALS	BEFORE What can I do during my mobility project to achieve these goals? Explain	DURING What am I actually doing? Explain	AFTER Have I reached my goal? Please tick if yes.
LISTENING			
I can understand the main points in short and very simple TV news, if I can see pictures.			
I can understand what the topic is if people speak slowly and clearly.			
...			
READING			
I can understand simple descriptions of people, things and places.			
...			
SPEAKING			
I can order something to eat or drink in a simple way, e.g. in a bar.			
...			

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Fig. 2 Adopted from Lesson plan 9 for lower secondary school: *The European Language Portfolio: How do I learn and how do I want to learn?* (Egli Cuenat et al., 2015b, p. 41)

Before the mobility, the students are asked to fill in a blank template of an iceberg with the visible and invisible aspects of culture, which later serves as a basis of a discussion with the partner students. Once the mobility is completed, reflection on the changes in opinions and beliefs is encouraged. It is recommended that the whole process and the modifications to the iceberg be documented in the portfolio.

Example 3

DURING

Student teachers from all participating institutions in mixed groups present their icebergs and share their expectations and experiences of each other's cultures. They have the opportunity to confront their views with the representatives of the 'illustrated' culture as well as find out how their culture is perceived by others.

AFTER

After returning to their home institution, student teachers modify the icebergs and discuss their results with their classmates. They observe if their opinions have changed as a result of the mobility activity. Student teachers are encouraged to recall any examples illustrating the visible and invisible aspects of the host country culture.

FINAL PRODUCT FOR THE PORTFOLIO
The modified iceberg (or a photo of the iceberg). Student teachers can note down their observations: the relevant examples or the account of how their opinions have changed as a result of their mobility experience.

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Fig. 3 A fragment of Lesson plan 2 for student teachers: *The visible, the less visible, the invisible* (Egli Cuenat et al., 2015e, p. 8)

Irrespective of whether students record their intercultural and linguistic development in or outside the school context, the importance of a teacher/instructor, who essentially assumes the roles of a facilitator, a guide and/or a coach, in the reflection process should not be underestimated. It is visible, for instance, in Lee's research (2011), where the students involved in a study abroad project appreciated the freedom of choice while working independently on the final product; however, the process of in-depth critical analysis of and reflection on the intercultural encounters heavily relied on the teacher's guidance. Also, McKinnon (2018) underlines that the true value of a portfolio in a study abroad project lies in the possibility of ongoing support from an instructor in the home institution.

The value of mentoring in a mobility context has been confirmed in two small-scale studies on the implementation of PluriMobil resources. After the project involving a study abroad semester in an institution of teacher education in Switzerland, the participants underlined that they appreciated both autonomous learning and in-depth intercultural reflection. Despite a very tight time budget allotted to the work with PluriMobil, which consisted of an introductory session focused on the *ELP*, the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* and a learning diary, ongoing e-mail contact regarding the self-reflective tasks during the stay and two sessions after the stay for presentation with a common reflection and discussion, the project proved to be a minimal but very efficient condition to ensure the necessary guidance and support (Egli Cuenat et al., 2016). The outcomes of the second

project, in which PluriMobil resources were used to accompany Liechtenstein upper secondary learners' language stay in England and France, suggest the necessity for more extended teacher support during a stay abroad. Although the learners generally appreciated the intercultural and language benefits of the before-during-after scenario, some learners felt disadvantaged as they did not receive sufficient support and/or too little time was devoted to working on their portfolios during language lessons in the host institutions. It occurred that in some cases the receiving teachers were not sufficiently prepared for the work with PluriMobil resources (Sommerauer et al., 2016). This proves that mentoring can be effective only when all the involved institutions actively contribute to the study abroad endeavour.

3.3   Guidance on Self-Directed Learning

Goal-setting abilities and autonomous language learning skills are further promoted in a few lesson plans for all target groups that support the development of language awareness and selected aspects of communicative competence. In lesson plan 11, "I understand more than I think", younger learners learn that due to similarities between the languages, they can understand a lot through observation and context (see Fig. 4).

The resources for older groups focus on more complex aspects of plurilingual competence such as cognates, everyday expressions, culture-bound vocabulary, jokes, advertisements, formal/informal language use, plurilingual communication strategies (see Egli Cuenat & Höchle Meier, 2016) and non-verbal communication. In the home institution, in cooperation with teachers, students are advised to discuss the usefulness of selected items in the mobility context and choose the ones they wish to develop. During a mobility project, students expand their linguistic repertoires by exploring the surrounding, searching the Internet and other available sources, consulting their peers or host families. Subsequently, they record their progress in the form of a portfolio or a diary that will later constitute the basis of the final reflection on their linguistic growth upon project completion. Such a design not only encourages the mobility participants to actively use the language in communication, but also shows practical ways to enhance language skills independently of the teacher. Additionally, the exploration of culture-bound vocabulary, rich points (cf. Agar, 1994), idioms or advertisement slogans, that is the elements of language that are intricately linked to culture, may contribute to raising the students' sociolinguistic competence and intercultural awareness.

Self-directed language learning based on PluriMobil resources was attended to in a small-scale study abroad project that involved student teachers of foreign languages (Egli Cuenat et al., 2016). On the basis of lesson plan 9 – The European Language Portfolio – My learning diary, before the sojourn, the participants self-assessed their FL competence in order to set their own learning goals that both matched their own language learning needs and were relevant in the context of their intercultural experience. As the authors indicate, conscious reflection on the

Fig. 4 Adopted from Lesson plan 11 for primary school: *I understand more than I think* (Egli Cuenat et al., 2015f, p. 33)

progress made in the form of a learning diary during the mobility and on return to the home institution raised the student teachers' language learning awareness.

3.4   Soft Skills

To promote lifelong learning and boost students' academic and professional performance, apart from developing linguistic and intercultural competences, PluriMobil resources aim to support students in gaining a number of soft skills, many of which constitute important components of learner autonomy. A vast majority of PluriMobil lesson plans for all target groups is based on practical tasks that encourage active collaboration – through pair and group work – with other students both in the home and the partner institutions. The aim is to promote a spirit of cooperation and increase students' sense of ownership, which is additionally supported by constant attempts to engage students in the process of guided reflection. Students become responsible for the outputs of the collaborative work and are able to adapt to new

intercultural situations. Moreover, PluriMobil tasks often involve some degree of problem solving problems and negotiation of meaning. Task completion frequently depends on the students' ability to search for and analyse diverse resources in order to select and summarise relevant information.

4   Conclusions

Given both the financial and organisational costs involved, it seems natural to expect that both face-to-face and virtual mobility programmes should lead to tangible learning gains for participants. Whereas most existing instructional interventions tend to focus only on intercultural aspects of mobility experiences, we suggest that this objective should be supplemented with sessions devoted to fostering learner autonomy and study skills that facilitate language and academic progress in a new learning environment. As described in this chapter, PluriMobil resources are based on empirical findings that suggest that adequate pedagogical preparation, guidance and follow-up should be provided in order to optimise learning opportunities of a mobility experience. However, it should be remembered that PluriMobil is not a magical potion that automatically turns a mobility programme or a VE project into a successful and sustainable learning experience. The success of a pedagogical intervention based on these resources may depend, amongst other factors, on the learners' initial level of autonomy, willingness to cope with novel situations, depth of understanding of interculturality as well as the teachers' readiness and ability to foster learner autonomy. Moreover, the successful use of a portfolio as a tool that triggers reflection on both intercultural and language learning experiences depends to a large extent on the quality of support and guidance mobility participants receive on an ongoing basis. We understand that the support based on PluriMobil resources will not always result in the development of autonomous learning skills as not all learners will react positively to this type of pedagogy. Secondly, an intervention of this kind limited to one mobility/VE project might be insufficient. Fostering learner autonomy should be treated as a continuous and long-term process inherent to language and intercultural learning and teaching, both in and beyond the language classroom.

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